1951

A Study of the Religious Life and Opinions of Samuel Johnson, Ll.D.

Ella McElligott
Loyola University Chicago

A STUDY OF THE RELIGIOUS LIFE AND OPINIONS OF SAMUEL JOHNSON, LL.D.

by

Ella McElligott

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Loyola University in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts

February

1951

PREFACE

The great literary figure Samuel Johnson deserves to be known for his outstanding religious life and views, his deep humility and love of God, in the same degree as he is famous for his scholarship. Above all, he was a teacher of religion and morality. His bluff manner and quick retorts covered the simple man that he was, one who at all times was conscious of his Creator and of man's dependence upon Him for peace in this world and happiness in the next.

In his Dictionary Johnson defined religion as: "Virtue founded upon reverence for God and expectation of future rewards and punishments."

Johnson's life exemplified his definition to the fullest degree. He practiced many of the virtues that we think a Christian should profess; and he was ever conscious of the life to come, holding that this life is but a preparation for it.

He lived in an age when real religion in the hearts of a great part of the people was more or less dormant, and in a time when the great skeptics, Hume, Rousseau, and Voltaire, were busy with their pens. The ends which they were trying to achieve were far different from those which Johnson had in mind. Having

no love for infidels or skeptics, he never hesitated to speak out in bitter denunciation of them. "Scoundrels," he called them. Johnson was not perfect by any means, but his practice of religion was in marked contrast to that of many other prominent writers of his day, such as Gibbon, Hume, Lord Chesterfield, and Bolingbroke.

When one thinks of Dr. Johnson and certain aspects of his life, the picture of Chaucer's monk comes to mind, for like him he was "A manly man, to been an abbot able."

In a review of the Hooded Hawk, the recent life of Boswell written by D. B. Wyndham Lewis, Anne Fremantle says:

> Dr. Johnson was born out of his time. His gentle, chaste, ponderous goodness was better suited to the middle ages than to the libertine England of the Georges. He would have made a saintly outsize abbot.[1]

He was, indeed, father confessor to many persons in his day. By his emphasis upon the moral life, Samuel Johnson has likely led many others to follow the straight and good way and never to give up, no matter how oppressed. He was confident that there is a reward after this life.

This study will attempt to show the precise part religion played in his life, and that such a study is a rewarding and illuminating one.

---

1 Anne Fremantle, "Boswell's Boswell," The Commonweal, 47:376, January 23, 1948.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I

DR. JOHNSON'S LIFE WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO RELIGION

The city of Lichfield, Staffordshire, is famous not only because of its lofty-spired cathedral, but also because it is the birthplace of Doctor Samuel Johnson, the noted dictionary maker and unique eighteenth century literary figure. Here he was born September 18, N.S., 1709, in a house that faces the market place. The building, a two-storied one directly across from St. Mary's church, still stands. A draper's shop is on the ground floor, while the upper part houses a small museum devoted to Dr. Johnson and things pertaining to him and his times.

Doctor Johnson's introduction to the church was early,[1] for he was baptized in St. Mary's the day he was born, according to the rite of the Church of England. And he gave his allegiance to this communion all his life. We have no direct word that he felt that this was the only church for him, or that it was the

---

1 Biographical data obtained from Annals, An Account of the Life of Dr. Samuel Johnson from His Birth to His Eleventh Year, Written by Himself; The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D., by James Boswell; Anecdotes of the late Samuel Johnson, by Hester Lynch Thrale-Piozzi, as well as from other works listed in the bibliography.

true Church. He was born into it, and he felt that it was his duty to be true to it. One somehow senses, after a study of Doctor Johnson's life, that membership in this group did not satisfy his soul and enable him to receive the genuine good from his religion that others have received. There was a loneliness in his life that only God could have filled, but his Church did not bring him into that intimate union with his Creator, Whom he loved and respected devotedly, that he desired.

Johnson's God was a stern father who meted out rewards and punishments as they were earned. His constant worry was that when the time came to make an accounting, he might be found wanting. In his religion he had but few sacramental aids to cheer him along the hard road of life. The Supreme Being was constantly in his thoughts, but he did not have the attitude toward Him that, for instance, Newman had. Cardinal Newman speaks of God as his elder brother. There was a spirit of camaraderie in Newman's relations with God that Johnson did not enjoy, although his love for the Heavenly Father, so far as we can judge, was as sincere.

Newman's religion was a joy and sunshine in his life, but Johnson's kept him in a dark and troubled mood; and, instead of being a prop to his life, it weighed him down and was like a heavy chain about his neck. How sorry one feels that this great and good man never learned to experience the friendship and affection that St. Teresa felt toward God. He brought sunshine into her

life, and thoughts of Him prevented difficulties from becoming depressing. Johnson, who always craved friendship, missed the serenity and peace of mind that this Heavenly Friend could have bestowed upon him, if he had but learned to seek out God in the manner of the saints and the great religious leaders.

His father was Michael Johnson, a bookseller and stationer. He was an honest man, respected in his community, and of some little learning and prominence, as he held various small offices such as under-sheriff, sheriff, a nd magistrate.

The father passed on to Samuel a morbid melancholy which plagued Johnson all his life. Great fits of despair used to come over him. Samuel was heard to say once when in the midst of black melancholy that he would be willing to cut off his arm if it would help him any and restore his spirits.[2] The great business of his life was to escape from himself, and nothing cured him but company to whom he could talk and with whom he could forget himself momentarily. He also had a great dread of going insane, but his mind remained clear until he drew his last breath. Having a vivid imagination, he was careful to keep it under control for he thought the visionary schemes that result from this faculty lead but to madness. In his book History of Rasselas, one chapter, entitled "The Dangerous Prevalence of

---

2 James Boswell, The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D., Modern Library Edition, New York, n.d.. 293.

Imagination," takes up the subject in detail. Here he says:

> There is no man whose imagination does not sometime predominate over his reason, who can regulate his attention wholly by his will, and whose ideas will come and go at his command.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> In time some particular train of ideas fixes the attention; all other intellectual gratifications are rejected; the mind, in weariness, or leisure, recurs constantly to the favorite conception, and feasts on the luscious falsehood, whenever she is offended with the bitterness of truth. By degrees the reign of fancy is confirmed; she grows first imperious, and in time despotic. Then fictions begin to operate as realities, false opinions fasten upon the mind, and life passes in dreams of rapture or of anguish.[3]

Johnson then went on to say that one of the dangers of solitude is that it causes the mind to speculate and indulge in wild fancy. He tried always to have his moments occupied with company and talking or with his well known chemical experiments, so as to avoid the peril of idleness.

Johnson's prevalence to fits of despondency has always been the subject of much speculation. He is now known to have suffered from a neurosis all his life. Scholars of today are beginning to interpret and understand his temperament in the light of modern psychiatry, and are coming to interesting conclusions. In her essay "Johnson's Vile Melancholy," Katharine C. Balderston says that there is much need for a thorough going

---

3 Samuel Johnson, LL.D., Complete Works, New Cambridge Mass., Edition, n.d., IV, 134-135.

interpretation of Johnson's private life and emotional history. She presents certain evidence in the form of correspondence given for the first time which prompts her to say:

> I can only assert that such study as I have made of that history in the light of the evidence here assembled, leads me to believe that the root of his neurotic difficulties, his torturing melancholy, and his despairing sense of guilt was not his indulgence and love of food and drink (as Watkins would have us believe) but a strong amorous nature severely repressed after his wife's death. Also, a study of all of Johnson's pronouncements on and descriptions of melancholy and and madness shows conclusively that his conception of madness involved only one type--that which arose from obsessive indulgence in culpable fantasy, which aroused melancholy despair in the victim, and finally impaired or destroyed his sense of reality.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> With Boswell I would deny that his sense of guilt arose from such little venial trifles as pouring milk into his tea on Good Friday. I am convinced that the weight of evidence indicates that these fantasies were erotic in their nature.[4]

The Watkins mentioned in the above quotation is W. B. C. Watkins, author of Perilous Balance, Princeton University Press, 1939.

Johnson, however, suffered from melancholy and feelings of despair from his earliest days. Persons of his own time referred to him as a hypochondriac. Hypochondria was considered a disease of the mind which made one irritable, dejected, fretful and gloomy, so that existence was usually miserable.

In his book Post Mortems of Mere Mortals, Charles

---

4 Katharine C. Balderston, "Johnson's Vile Melancholy," The Age of Johnson, ed., F. W. Hilles, New Haven, 1949, 10-11.

MacLaurin says: "There can be little doubt that the illustrious Doctor Johnson was a psychasthenic." He describes psychasthenia as a grim half sister to neurasthenia from which it appears to differ in that while neurasthenia merely shows that a man's nervous system is not sufficiently strong to stand the strong clouts and buffets of this wicked world, in psychasthenia he never had a chance. The best translation of the word "psychasthenia" appears to be "unbalanced." He continues: "The man of genius is seldom insane, but he is often unbalanced and of the manic-depressive temperament, and at any moment may beknocked off his perch and may become definitely insane."5

In the Infirmities of Genius, by R. R. Madden, published in 1833, the author attemps to show that persons of unusual attainments are the prey to many ills. Johnson's strange mode of living, his late retiring hours and consequently tardy arising, his habits of eating heavily and at other times of fasting longer than normal periods, all tended to upset him. It was the belief even in his day, as we now know, that the condition of the body is reflected in the mind and spirit. It is not surprising that his physical condition affected his mental state. Although the views given above throw light on Dr. Johnson's difficulties, they

---

5 Charles MacLaurin, Post Mortems of Mere Mortals, New York, 1935, 17-19.

do not justify the judgment of Charles MacLaurin that he was often on the verge of insanity.[6]

Johnson's mother was Sarah Ford, a person of great piety and understanding, from whom he received his deep religious sense. His very first impression of religion was derived from her, when as a small child she spoke to him of Heaven as a place to which good people went, and of Hell as a place where bad people went. In order better to fix this lesson in his memory she sent him at once to repeat it to their man servant Thomas Jackson. His mother's words made a deep impression on Johnson, one which he never forgot.

There is a story told that when Johnson was only three years old, he insisted that his father take him with him to the Cathedral at Lichfield to hear Dr. Sacheveral, a famous churchman of that time; for, as Boswell says, "he seemed to have got the excitement of the public and zeal for this very renowned speaker, and would have stayed forever in the church satisfied with beholding him."[7]

Johnson who had been put out to nurse as a baby contracted a disfiguring facial disease, which destroyed the sight

---

6 R. R. Madden, Infirmities of Genius, London, 1833, I, 246.

7 Life, 16.

of one eye, affected his hearing, and marked him for life. At the age of two he was brought to London by his mother to be touched by Queen Anne for scrofula, or "the king's evil," as it was called. The Queen's magic touch had no effect, however, for his face remained scarred. He always treasured the coin that was used in the touching, and had a vague memory of the Queen as a tall woman with diamonds and a black hood.

Some writers feel that Johnson had good grounds for his melancholy because of this facial disease which made him an object of pity and disgust. In addition one could not be any too cheerful when his eyesight and hearing were impaired. His twitchings and nervous mannerisms of hands and feet also were much in his disfavor.

Though Johnson learned of religion early, as he grew to boyhood he showed few angelic traits. Very often he displayed the temper that was characteristic of him at times in his adult years. Many stories are told of his pugnacity. As a boy he was so near-sighted that a servant always was sent to bring him home from school. One day this attendant did not arrive on time, so young Johnson set out alone. The school mistress, fearing that he might miss the way or be injured by a passing cart, followed him. Seeing her as he turned about, he flew into a rage, and ran back and kicked her with all his strength. His mother when angry one day called him a puppy. "You know what they call a puppy's

mother," he said in retort.

When Johnson was a sick old man he tried to make amends for disobedience to his father as a boy. The father had asked him to accompany him to Uttoxeter market to help him in his stall there; but Johnson, lazy and indolent, refused. Years later he went to the very same place and stood bareheaded in the rain for a long period, as the passing crowds looked at him, trying thus to atone for his early refusal to aid his father.

Johnson was rather a precocious young lad and learned to read very early. While he was still a tiny child in petticoats his mother one day gave him the Book of Common Prayer, and told him he must learn the Collect for the day by heart. She went on with her housework, leaving him to study, but had no sooner reached the second floor than she heard his small patter after her "What is it now?" she asked. Excitedly young Sam replied, "I can say it, I can say it," and he repeated it correctly, although he could have read it no more than twice.

As was the custom in nearly every Christian family in those days, Sunday was observed as a strict religious holiday. Boswell reports Johnson as saying:

> Sunday was a heavy day to me when I was a boy. My mother confined me on that day, and made me read The Whole Duty of Man, from a great part of which I could derive no instruction. When for instance I had read the chapter on theft which from my infancy I had been taught was wrong, I was no more con-

> vinced that theft was wrong than before; so there was no accession to knowledge. A boy should be introduced to such books by having his attention directed to the arrangement, to the style, and other excellencies of composition; so that the mind being thus engaged by an amusing variety of objects, may not grow weary.[8]

When Johnson was about nine, he fell into a state of inattention about religion. It happened at this time that some repair work was being done to the church at Lichfield in which the Johnsons had a pew, so that it was easy for him to omit church and go off to the fields and read. This habit of non-attendance at church continued until his fourteenth year. He said to Boswell, "I became a lax talker against religion, for I did not think much against it, and this lasted till I went to Oxford where it would not be suffered." At Oxford he happened to come across a copy of Law's Serious Call to a Holy Life, which he thought would be dull and something to laugh at. Instead he says: "I found Law quite an overmatch for me and this was the first occasion of my thinking in earnest of religion, after I became capable of rational inquiry."[9]

Now that Johnson's religious sense was re-awakened and vitalized, religion became the predominating object of his thought.

---

8 Ibid., 33.

9 Ibid.

Young Johnson was a very good student at school. He learned Latin thoroughly and was able to write and speak it all his life. Many fine epitaphs in Latin honoring the memory of departed friends have come from his pen. When someone commented on how he acquired his knowledge of Latin, he said, "My master whipped me well." Johnson had one advantage in that he had his father's books to pore over, so that it was almost natural for him to become a scholar.

Johnson had a younger brother, Nathaniel, who, however, died when only a young man of twenty-seven. When at home there was rivalry between the brothers for their mother's affection. The brothers, therefore, were not chums, and each sought his own amusements. Nathaniel, who was of a different temperament, helped his father with his business and was not as lazy and carefree as Samuel.

After finishing Lichfield Grammar School, Johnson entered Stourbridge school in Worcestershire, where he was an assistant to Mr. Wentworth, the master, and taught the younger boys. He remained but a year at Stourbridge. Returning to Lichfield, he spent the next two years idling about and reading to his heart's content. He did not read only for amusement, and as he tells Boswell:

> not voyages and travel, but all literature, Sir, all ancient writers, all manly: though but little Greek, only some of Anacreon and Hesiod; but in this irregular manner I have

> looked into a great many books, which were not commonly known at the Universities, where they seldom read any books but what are put into their hands by their tutors; so that when I came to Oxford, Dr. Adam, now master of Pembroke College, told me I was the best qualified for the University that he had ever known come there.[10]

Many persons thought Johnson's father was acting unwisely in sending his son to Oxford, for he was but a poor man. However, he stuck to his resolve and Johnson's life was quickened by the atmosphere and associations of the place.

Samuel entered Pembroke College, Oxford, on October 31, 1728, when he was in his nineteenth year. His odd figure and strange appearance were rather disconcerting to the authorities as they received him. The father told what a good scholar the son was, how he wrote poetry, and even wrote Latin verses. All the while young Sam kept still but, before the interview was over, surprised everyone by suddenly quoting Macrobius at an opportune time in the conversation. The extensive reading he had indulged in at home was apparent. He is known one time to have remarked that he knew as much at eighteen as he did at fifty. He admitted his judgment was not so good, but he had all the facts. Likely he may have been referring only to literature and the classics. In later life he traveled extensively and learned foreign languages. At seventy-two he made a notation in his journal that he

---

10 Ibid., 28.

proposed to study the Italian language. He also was known to speak very enthusiastically of his tour to the Hebrides that he made with Boswell in 1773; and he remarked that he got an acquisition of more ideas by it than by anything he remembered, as he saw a different system of life.

His tutor at Oxford, Mr. Jordan, asked him to translate Pope's Messiah into Latin verse one day. He did it so well that soon the whole University knew of him. Pope himself heard of it and was extremely pleased.

Johnson had great affection for Pembroke College and visited it a number of times in the course of his life. He delighted to enumerate the number of poets that Pembroke fostered, saying to Boswell one day, "Sir, we are a nest of singing birds."

There is a difference of opinion as to how long Johnson remained at Oxford. Some say three years, while others who searched Oxford records say the books show that he was there only a little over a year. He was miserably poor and lacked money to buy even books. Always wearing shabby clothes, he was a forbidding-looking creature, especially since his face was marked with the scrofulous disease that had attacked him when he was a baby.

Fits of melancholy came over the young student at times. At other periods he was gay and frolicsome and loved to play tricks on his classmates. Learning came easy to him, as he had a wonderful memory. He was able to glance at a page and quickly

absorb its main points. His tutors soon found out that he knew more than themselves in many respects, and he enjoyed a certain distinction because of his intellectual powers.

According to Boswell, Johnson left Oxford and returned to his native Litchfield in 1731. His father had had reverses in business, and it was up to Samuel to find something to do to gain a livelihood. In December of this year the father died, thus changing things considerably for him.

Johnson's share of his father's small estate was twenty pounds. In one of his diaries at this time he notes:

> I now therefore see that I must make my own fortune. Meanwhile let me take care that the powers of my mind may not be debilitated by poverty, and that indigence does not force me to do any criminal act.[11]

Johnson learned the habit of prayer early in life. He prayed when starting out on a journey, when undertaking any new work, or when perplexed with life's difficulties. He was ever conscious that God was the giver of good things. He liked to compose prayers for the occasion, many of which he copied into journal. The first one that he recorded was written on his twenty-eighth birthday. He writes:

---

11 Ibid., 39.

> Mayest Thou, O God, enable me, for Jesus Christ's sake, to spend this day in such a manner, that I may receive comfort from it at the hour of death, and in the day of judgment. Amen.[12]

It is certain from what we know of him, however, that he started to pray when he was a much younger man and kept up this practice all his life.

Johnson tried various employments in this period when he was seeking how best to use his talents, and at times worked as an usher in the school at Market Bosworth in Leicestershire; but the dull sameness of the work irked him. He soon gave it up.

He now attempted to do something with his pen. When in Pembroke College, he had read and enjoyed a book entitled Voyage to Abyssinia, written by Father Pierre Lobo, a Portuguese Jesuit. Thinking a translation from the French into English might be a useful and profitable venture, he undertook the work. He was successful in having it printed in Birmingham, although the title page read London. Printers were more certain to have their books sell if these works appeared to originate in the metropolis. Johnson received only five guineas for the translation. He was at that time living in Birmingham, having accepted the invitation of Mr. Edmund Hector, whom he knew in Lichfield, to stay at his home for a while.

---

12 Ibid., 34.

The records show that Johnson's attachment to women in his young manhood years was slight and transient; and it is certain, as Boswell says, that he formed no criminal connection. He was a hearty fellow, and his biggest vice was the drinking of wine in a quantity sufficient to exhilarate himself. Only once is it known that he became intoxicated. In later years he gave up wine and drink altogether, and in company lifted a glass of water when a toast was offered. He found that it was easier to abstain altogether than to be temperate. He frequently advised Boswell to drink water only, "for you are then sure not to get drunk; whereas if you drink wine you are never sure." It is known that Boswell had a fondness for more potent drink and was very convivial. One time he mentioned the maxim in vino veritas, adding that one who is well warmed with wine will speak the truth. Johnson replied:

> Why, Sir, that may be an argument for drinking if you suppose men in general to be liars. But, Sir, I would not keep company with a fellow who lies as long as he is sober, and whom you must make drunk before you can get a word of truth out of him. [13]

While in Birmingham, Johnson made the acquaintance of Mrs. Elizabeth Porter, a widow, and soon became her fervent admirer, although she was twice his age. He charmed her by his

---

13 Ibid., 421-22.

conversation at their first meeting, and she remarked to her daughter, who, incidentally was close to Johnson's own age, "this is the most sensible man I ever saw in my life." He lost no time in proposing marriage. He was rather a gawky looking fellow, with his scarred face, bony figure, and hair that stood up straight; and no doubt the mature widow put him at his ease. His deep religious sense and inclination to live right made it plain that a young man of his ardent passions should take a wife. When Mrs. Porter signified a willingness to accept his proposal, he hurried to Lichfield for his mother's permission to marry. Knowing her son's disposition, she did not oppose him.

The marriage took place at Derby near Birmingham on July 9, 1735. Though Johnson was only half the age of his bride, he was able to manage her and learned to do so from the start. We can gather this fact from the account he gave to Boswell of an incident that took place on the marriage journey.

> Sir, she had read the old romances, and had got into her head the fantastical notion that a woman of spirit should use her lover like a dog. So, Sir, at first she told me that I rode too fast, and she could not keep up with me; and when I rode a little slower, she passed me, and complained that I lagged behind. I was not to be made the slave of caprice; and I resolved to begin as I meant to end. I, therefore, pushed on briskly till I was fairly out of her sight. The road lay between two hedges, so I was sure she could not miss it; and I contrived that she should come up with me. When she did, I observed her to be in tears.[14]

---

14 Ibid., 50-51.

Johnson's boyhood days were over, and the serious business of making a home and providing for a wife was now before him. Though his marriage seems a queer one to the reader and likely puzzled his contemporaries, he maintained it was a love match, and he seemed eminently happy and satisfied during his life with her. His favorite name for her was Tetty or Tetsy, which is apt to draw a smile as the reader comes across it in his letters and in references to her. Of course for long periods Johnson was in London, busy with his literary work, while his wife remained in Lichfield and the surrounding country; but the letters he wrote to her show his fondness. When death took Mrs. Johnson years later, he was heartbroken; and until the day of his own death spoke of her tenderly, and commended her soul to God in his prayers.

Johnson's newly acquired wife brought a fortune of 800 pounds to the marriage, which enabled him to open a boarding school or academy at Edial, not far from Lichfield. The venture did not prove a success as only three or four pupils enrolled. They included David Garrick, who became the famous actor, and his brother Peter. After a year and a half he gave up the academy, having decided the life of a schoolmaster was not for him.

His thoughts now turned to London, as the most likely place in which to make his fortune. He set forth accompanied

by his pupil David Garrick, a young man twenty years old, while Mrs. Johnson remained behind.

London exerted a spell upon Johnson that stayed with him all his life, for here was the full tide of human existence experienced in all its hues and shadows. Here was everything. When one is tired of London, he is tired of life, Johnson often later remarked. Boswell, too, loved London, and would have liked to live there permanently, but he had home ties in Scotland. Whenever conversation lagged, interest could be revived by referring to the superiority of London as a place to live. Said Johnson once:

> The happiness of London is not to be conceived but by those who have been in it. I will venture to say there is more learning and science within the circumference of ten miles from where we now sit, than in all the rest of the kingdom.[15]

Johnson loved London so much that he returned there to die when his final illness overtook him. He had been visiting in his native Lichfield shortly before his death, and friends there willingly would have taken care of him and made his last days comfortable if he had remained; but he preferred to go back to London while he was able.

Not too much is known of Johnson's early London days. He seldom referred to them, as it is believed they were times of gloom and privation. Garrick and he went their separate ways,

---

15 Ibid., 348.

as neither had much money and each had to look out for himself. Johnson lived as simply as he could, while he sought ways to make a living with his pen. Fortunately he made the acquaintance of Edward Cave, the editor of Gentleman's Magazine, and thus became a contributor to its pages, earning enough to support himself as he explored London life and made friends and acquaintances in the big city.

One of Johnson's duties on the Gentleman's Magazine was to write up the so-called Parliamentary debates. In these early days the press was not admitted to the proceedings in Parliament. Cave, however, was able to have a few persons admitted with the aid of the doorman. These men secured names, took notes, and made a few observations, and from these notes Johnson wrote up his version of the debates that took place. His oratorical style was particularly suited to this type of work, and the debates found great favor with the magazine's readers. As soon as he discovered, however, that the debates were being received as genuine speeches delivered in Parliament, he refused to write any more, "for he would not be accessory to the propagation of falsehood."[16] Thus his love of truth in everything showed itself at an early age; and to hold to his principles he was willing to forego badly needed income.

---

16 Ibid., 85.

In these early days in London Johnson met Richard Savage, the poet and actor, whose life he wrote about very touchingly, and together they spent long hours roaming the city, seeing it in all its misery and splendor. Often neitherof them had the price of a bed when the chill morning air made them seek shelter. They had to crawl into some corner or doorway to escape the weather while trying to get a little rest.

Boswell has hinted a few times in his great work that in these early London days, Johnson led rather a loose life and committed great sins which weighed heavily on him and were, in part, the cause of the black fits of despair which overtook him. Why did he worry so much about the salvation of his soul or denounce himself as such a vile sinner in his meditations, as he begged God's forgiveness, if he did not transgress God's laws? Boswell wondered. Boswell felt that Johnson's troubled conscience was not due alone to such little venial sins as putting milk into his tea on Good Friday. He asks us to read this prayerful plea of anguish written by Johnson and recorded in his book of devotions.

> O God, Giver and Preserver of all life; by whose power I was created, and by whose providence I am sustained, look down upon me with such tenderness and mercy; grant that I may not have been created to be finally destroyed; that I may not be preserved to add wickedness to wickedness. O Lord, let me not sink into total depravity; look down upon me and rescue me at last from the captivity of sin. Almighty and most merciful God, who hast continued my life from year to year . . . . . .

> grant that by longer life I may become less desirous of sinful pleasures, and more careful of eternal happiness. Let not my years be multiplied to increase my guilt; but as my age advances, let me become more pure in my thoughts, more regular in my desires, and more obedient to Thy laws.[17]

Many students and admirers of Johnson have come to his defense. Others feel inclined to side with Boswell. John Wilson Croker, in the notes to his edition of Boswell's Life, disposes of the veiled charges hinted at by Boswell very succinctly and reproves him for reviving old stories which, whether true or false originally, were nearly fifty years old.

Boswell tries to apologize or defend himself for intimating that Johnson's soul was scarred with early sins, by mentioning that Johnson in his studies of Parnell and Addison did not think it necessary to forbear stating that they were intemperate in the use of wine.

At this point Croker's note reads:

> But it is quite another matter to insinuate oneself into a man's confidence, to follow him for twenty years like his shadow, to note his words and actions like a spy, to ransack his most secret papers, and scrutinize even his conscientious confessions, and then, with all the sinister authority, which such a show of friendship must confer, to accuse him of low and filthy guilt supposed to have been committed a quarter of a century before the informer and his calumniated friend had ever met, and which consequently, Mr. Boswell could only have had from hearsay or from guess, and which all personal testimony and all the documentary evidence seem to disprove.

---

17 Ibid., 1178.

> Surely, Mr. Boswell's good sense, good taste, and good feeling, must have on this occasion, given way under some powerful self-delusion.[18]

Bishop Percy, author of Porcy's Reliques, a friend and contemporary of Johnson, in his sketch of Johnson's life, later reprinted in Robina Napier's Johnsoniana, says that if Johnson had relations with the women of the town in his nocturnal ramblings, he would not likely have confessed to Boswell, and therefore his hints must be received as a pure invention of his own. Further he says:

> But if Johnson ever conversed with these unfortunate females, it is believed he did so in order to reclaim them from their dissolute life by moral and religious impression; for to one of his friends he once related a conversation of that sort which he had with a young female in the street, and that asking her what she thought she was made for, her reply was 'she supposed to please the gentlemen.' His friend intimating his surprise that he should have had communication with street walkers, and implying a suspicion that they were not of a moral tendency, Johnson expressed the highest indignation that any other motive could ever be suspected.[19]

In his biography of Johnson, Joseph Wood Krutch says:

> It must be remembered that he had strong sex impulses and rigid scruples--either one of which characteristics is likely to be troublesome alone, but to be much more so in combination with the other. It has been suggested that he may, on occasion, have yielded to impulse, but Boswell himself, a furious rake and ready enough to make allowances for masculine weaknesses does not dare risk more than a guarded suspicion.[20]

---

18 Life, Croker ed., New York, 1851. II, p.433.

19 Johnsoniana, ed., Robina Napier, London, 1889, 230.

20 Joseph Wood Krutch, Samuel Johnson, New York, 1944, 28.

D. B. Wyndham Lewis, author of The Hooded Hawk, a life of James Boswell, says, in reference to this passage in Boswell's Life on which critics contemporary and modern have always fastened with loud denunciation:

> To rebut this we have the evidence of Johnson's sterling moral character, and rigid control of strong passions, together with that angelic piety for the unfortunate which characterized him. Johnson was especially moved by the misery of London prostitutes, and was once known to carry a sick drab home to his own house, and have her properly attended.[21]

Except for the two or three instances where Boswell hints at early sins of Johnson, everything else that he says leads one to believe that Johnson was a man of sterling moral character, a man who had the respect and veneration of the great figures of his day, as well as of humble characters whose lives in any way touched his. Early sins, if any, were surely atoned for in a long life of service to the poor, to friends, and, above all, to his Creator, Who was constantly in his thoughts.

Johnson's upright character impressed everyone on slight acquaintance, and no member of the clergy was treated with greater reserve and respect. As he said once, "Obscenity and levity were always omitted in my presence."

Mrs. Thrale, the great friend, who with her brewer

---

21 D. B. Wyndham Lewis, The Hooded Hawk, New York, 1947, 240.

husband made Johnson's life pleasant and comfortable for a score of years by offering him sanctuary in her home, says in her reminiscence:

> Reasonable with regard to others, he had formed vain hopes of performing impossibilities himself; and, finding his good works ever below his desires and intent, filled his imagination with fears that he should never obtain forgiveness for omissions of duty and criminal waste of time. These ideas kept him in constant anxiety concerning his salvation, and the vehement petitions he constantly made for a longer continuance on earth, were doubtless the cause of his so-prolonged existence.[22]

Mrs. Thrale knew Johnson well and always spoke of his blameless life. There is, no doubt, considerable truth in her belief that he expected perfection from himself, and felt that in not attaining it he was lax in his conduct and was sinning against God.

Johnson knew that he had great talents, but judged that because of his indolence he was not making the use of them which his Creator would expect. Thus he feared he would be held accountable when the day of judgment came. As he surveyed the passing years and saw but little improvement in himself, he was apt to fall into one of his fits of black melancholy.

In 1750 Johnson started his series of essays published on Tuesdays and Saturdays as a periodical bearing the title,

---

22 Hester Lynch Thrale-Piozzi, Anecdotes of the late Samuel Johnson, LL.D., ed., D. C. Roberts, Boston, 1925, 74.

The Rambler. These papers added greatly to Johnson's reputation as a philosopher and moral writer and found quick favor with the public.

The first major sorrow in Johnson's life was the loss of his wife in 1752. The night she died he was almost wild with grief, and only prayer helped him get hold of himself. He sent a note to his friend Reverend Dr. Taylor, who lived nearby and who hurried over; together they prayed until Johnson was composed. He wrote the funeral sermon for his wife's services, which, however, was never preached but was published after his death in his Prayers and Meditations.

Although Johnson and his wife were often separated because of his literary labors in London, she was a bulwark at home and helped fill the need for someone to rely upon when he had to get away from himself and his gloomy thoughts. Though not learned, she had good judgment and certain critical powers. Johnson told with great satisfaction how Mrs. Johnson once remarked after a new number of the Rambler had been published, "I thought very well of you before, but I did not imagine you could have written anything equal to this."[23]

After Johnson's demise the following prayer written the night his wife died was found in his effects:

---

23 Life, Modern Library edition, 122.

> O Lord! Governor of heaven and earth, in whose hands are embodied and departed Spirits, if thou hast ordained the souls of the Dead to minister to the Living, and appointed my departed wife to have care of me, grant that I may enjoy the good effects of her attention and ministration, whether exercised by appearances, impulses, dreams, or in any other manner agreeable to Thy Government. Forgive my presumption, enlighten my ignorance, and however meaner agents are employed, grant me the blessed influence of Thy Holy Spirit, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. [24]

For writing and believing the sentiments contained in this prayer, Johnson often has been accused of being superstitious. No one could ever know whether Johnson's plea was answered. Boswell infers it might have been, for he who suffered similarly years later in the loss of his wife confessed that he had had certain experiences of benignant communication by dreams.

The memory of his wife remained fresh with Johnson as long as he lived. He spoke of her tenderly, prayed for her, and even prayed to her, "as far as it may be lawful," he added, as this was not the common practice in his Church. One of his very last acts, when he was old and sick, was to have a stone put over her grave. His indolent spirit but well meaning heart had kept him from attending to many things he meant to do while he was young and strong.

Charles MacLaurin remarks that toward the end of Mrs. Johnson's life, Johnson had begun to consider her less as a wife

---

24 Ibid., 138.

in the ordinary sense of the term than as a mother surrogate, and that is likely a true estimate of this rather strange union.[25]

Johnson had been working on his Dictionary, and after his wife's death he tried to forget his loneliness by working harder and more steadily. On April 3, 1753, he began the second volume and made this entry in his diary.

> O God, who hast hitherto supported me, enable me to proceed in this labor, and in the whole task of my present state; that when I shall render up, at the last day, an account of the talent committed to me, I may receive pardon, for the sake of Jesus Christ. Amen.[26]

In 1755, Oxford conferred on him the honorary degree of Master of Arts. The Dictionary also was published in 1755. At this time, too, appeared his famous letter to Lord Chesterfield, in which he declined Chesterfield's offer of patronage at this late date, as he had no use for it then. He was made very happy by the honor from Oxford University, which his friends took pains to procure so as to grace the title page of his Dictionary.

In 1758 he began a new periodical paper, called the Idler, which came out every Saturday in a weekly newspaper called The Universal Chronicle. The Rambler, his first paper, had not been published after 1752, the year of his wife's death. The Idler was continued until 1760. Some of the papers were contrib-

---

25 MacLaurin, Post Mortems, 24.

26 Life, 150.

uted by Johnson's friends. On the whole, although they are not as popular as the Rambler series, many of them show Johnson's mind busy with moral and philosophic questions. Some of the titles are, "Robbery of Time," "Thinking," "Death of a Friend," "Flight of Time," "Domestic Greatness Unattainable," "Self-Denial," "Physical Evil and Moral Good."

In 1759 another great sorrow came to Johnson in the death of his mother in her ninetieth year. Though he loved her devotedly and wrote her many beautiful letters, he had but seldom gone back to Lichfield to see her because of the pressure of his literary work in London and of natural indolence in undertaking a journey. Her death, therefore, was a more painful shock. In one of the last letters he wrote to her, he said:

> I would have Miss read to you from time to time the Passion of our Savior, and sometimes the sentences of the Communion service, 'Come unto me all ye that travail and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.'[27]

When she lay dying, he wrote this touching missive that comes straight from the heart:

> Dear Honored Mother:
> Neither your condition nor your character make it fit for me to say much. You have been the best mother, and I believe the best mother in the world. I thank you for your indulgence to me, and beg forgiveness for all that I have done ill, and of all that I have omitted to do well. God grant you his Holy Spirit and receive you to everlasting happiness, for Jesus Christ's sake. Amen.
> I am dear, dear mother,
> Your dutiful son,[28]

---

27 George Birkbeck Hill, ed., Letters of Samuel Johnson, LL.D., New York, 1892, I, 75.

28 Ibid., 78.

When his friend James Elphinstone had lost his own mother some years previously, Johnson wrote him a letter of condolence which is often quoted. He said that he had read the news of her passing with tears in her eyes. Tears were of no use, he knew, because the business of life must go on. He said further in this letter that the greatest benefit which one friend can confer upon another is to guard and excite and elevate his virtues.

> This your mother will perform, if you diligently preserve the memory of her life, and of her death; a life, as far as I can learn, useful, wise, and innocent; and a death, resigned, peaceful and holy. I cannot forbear to mention, that neither reason nor revelation denies you to hope, that you may increase her happiness, by obeying her precepts; and that she may, in her present state, look with pleasure upon every act of virtue, to which her instructions or example have contributed. Whether this be more than a pleasing dream, or a just opinion of separate spirits, is, indeed, of no great importance to us, when we consider ourselves acting under the eye of God; yet, surely there is something pleasing in the belief, that our separation from those whom we love, is merely corporeal; and it may be a great incitement to virtuous friendship, if it can be made probable that the union, which has received the Divine approbation, shall continue to eternity.
>
> There is one expedient, by which you may, in some degree continue her presence. If you write down minutely what you remember of her from your earliest years, you will read it with great pleasure, and receive from it many hints of soothing recollection when time shall remove her yet farther, and your grief shall be matured to veneration.[29]

Johnson received great comfort in his belief that there was some bond between the living and the dead. When relatives and dear friends passed away, he thought of them as living in that

---

29 Works, IV, 161.

other home and enjoying God's presence, such as he hoped would be his reward when it pleased his Savior to call him.

To meet the expenses of his mother's funeral and to pay off her little debts he wrote The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia, an Oriental tale, giving some of his views on life and its vicissitudes, as gleaned from his own experience. He wrote it in the evenings of one week and sent the parts to the printer as soon as they were finished, never revising them. This work was immediately popular, and of all of Johnson's writings today, it is likely one of the few to be read.

Johnson was always busy with various small pieces, such as political tracts, reviews of books, dedications, prologues, and the like, in the period between his large works. He was inclined to be lazy and found it difficult to get started on a new project, once something was finished and in the printer's hands. He kept late hours and usually did not arise until the day was well advanced. One resolution that he made over and over, year after year, was to rise earlier, at least by eight. He delighted in conversation and dreaded parting with his companions in the evening as he would then be left alone, so that it was the wee small hours of the morning before he dragged his ponderous figure to his habitation. Here he had to have his tea, of which he drank an inordinate amount, no matter how late the hour, and likely he

would then read for a good part of the night, or examine his conscience and record something in his private journal before finally snuffing out his candle. Mrs. Thrale admits she almost lost her health sitting up late hours and making him tea time after time while he was in her home. When there was much company of an evening, she took advantage and retired early, leaving someone else to entertain the Doctor and listen to his conversation.

Johnson's life was made easier by the award of an honorary pension of 300 pounds a year by the Government in 1762. This was given to him as a reward for literary merit and did not alter his political views in any way. He was a Tory and favored the House of Stuart. At this time also a pension was given to Thomas Sheridan, actor and playwright. Johnson thought it very improper that he also be given this honor and felt that it detracted from the value of his own. His sarcastic remarks were carried to Sheridan's ears. Thus a coolness sprang up between Sheridan and Johnson, although they had been good friends. Boswell remarks:

> This rupture with Sheridan deprived Johnson of one of his most agreeable resources for amustment in his lonely evenings; for Sheridan's well-informed, animated and bustling mind never suffered conversation to stagnate.[30]

Johnson valued friendship very highly and, though he offended many persons by his blunt and dogmatic manner at times, he always tried to make amends and smooth matters over if anyone

---

30 Life, 236.

ever was hurt by him. He said once, "Consider that day lost in which you do not make a friend." He believed in keeping friendship in repair and kept up a great correspondence with many persons. He and Sheridan, however, never adjusted their differences. Johnson's vanity was wounded and he made no overtures, so that the two continued in a state of enmity.

The year 1763 is an important one in Johnson's life, for it was then that Boswell, that amazing young man from Scotland was introduced to Johnson. Boswell was twenty-three and Johnson fifty-four. The story of their first meeting in Davies' bookshop as recorded in the Life is a rare and vivid piece of reporting. Lucky, indeed, for the world that the two met; for out of their acquaintance grew a work of genius, the great Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D., that has no equal in the field of biography.

The association of these two men proved a happy one for both; especially so for Johnson, as Boswell was young and gay, quickly adjusted himself to Johnson's ways, odd as many of them were, and in addition gave him that silent adulation that must have pleased him. He also gave the lonely man companionship, a sense of belonging to someone, and a chance to talk out his mind. Boswell knew his place and was content to bask in the sunlight of the greatness of Dr. Johnson, without being too bold or forward. All this, no doubt, appealed to the vanity of Johnson, and proved a prop to his life. But for Boswell, Johnson might also have been

forgotten. It is true that Johnson was a well known literary figure before Boswell arrived and was celebrated for his conversational powers. Many persons, including friends and contemporaries, have written sketches of Johnson's life, but in the course of time he likely would have been known as another eighteenth century writer whose works would be referred to by scholars occasionally. The Life has given perpetual fame to Johnson, and his name will live as long as men read books. Boswell, too, acquired a certain immortality, all of which is deserved, as he shows what one can do if he sets his mind to it. Very early after meeting Johnson he decided that he was going to write the great man's life. He started a system of note-taking and kept at it doggedly, no matter how late he hour when he left Johnson's company after a visit. He succeeded in giving the world a masterpiece, although the world labeled Boswell a fool. However, recent scholarship is beginning to evaluate Boswell in a different light, and there are some who call him a genius.

We do not know much about Johnson's earlier life, but thanks to Boswell we have a fairly complete picture of Johnson from the time they met because of Boswell's diligence in note-taking and in selecting just the right details to portray the character, a mixture of good and bad.

Boswell never was happier than when he was trailing some prominent figure and basking in the fame of his presence.

He made himself known to Voltaire, Rousseau, Hume, General Paoli, and others; but Johnson was the one to whom he was most attracted. The Doctor had just the right amount of wisdom, sense, and worldliness, to prove a bulwark for a gay young man anxious to taste all of life's pleasures. Through Johnson's insistence he was made a member of the famous Literary Club, and there he met the prominent men in London life.

Johnson and Boswell had many things in common, and yet in many respects they were dissimilar. They both loved London, the literary life, traveling about, and talk. In addition Boswell suffered from the black dog melancholy, even to a greater degree than Johnson did.

The Literary Club which Johnson dominated by his oratorical powers and commanding presence was founded in 1764. Sir Joshua Reynolds first proposed it, and Johnson seconded it. Johnson loved to dine in company with eminent persons who would listen to his views and to talk long hours away. Some of the most prominent figures in the literary and artistic world belonged to the Club from its start, such as Oliver Goldsmith, Edmund Burke, Sir John Hawkins, Dr. Christopher Nugent, Dr. Charles Burney, Topham Beauclerk, and Bennett Langton; and in the course of the years many leading personages were members and enjoyed the hospitality and friendship of the prominent wits of the day.

It is true that Johnson liked to talk. Mrs. Thrale says:

> No man conversed so well as he on every subject; no man so acutely discerned the reason of every fact, the motive of every action, the end of every design.[31]

He distinguished between talk and conversation. Talk was mere chit-chat, a waste of time, while conversation had substance to it and was the wine of life. Boswell was questioning Johnson once about a gathering he had attended without him. "You had plenty of talk, I suppose," said Boswell. "We had talk enough to be sure," answered Johnson, "but no conversation." He felt that in order to have good conversation a man's mind had to be disciplined by constant reading and study and had no patience with anyone who indulged in silly prattle, often offending such a speaker by cutting him short with a pertinent or sarcastic retort. He enjoyed the conversation of John Wesley but remarked:

> He is never at leisure. He is always obliged to go at a certain hour. This is very disagreeable to a man who loves to fold his legs and have out his talk, as I do.[32]

He lamented once that all serious and religious conversation was banished from the society of men, because a great advantage may be derived from it. "All acknowledged," he said, "what hardly anyone practiced, the obligations we were under of making the concerns of eternity the governing principle of our lives. Every man at last wishes for retreat; he sees his expecta-

---

31 Thrale-Piozzi, Anecdotes, 153.

32 Life, 767.

tions frustrated in the world, and begins to wean himself from it and to prepare for everlasting separation."[33]

In the year 1765 a number of important events took place in Johnson's life. He received the degree Doctor of Laws from Trinity College, Dublin, and could now be addressed as Doctor Johnson.

This year, too, 1765 he was introduced to the Thrales by Arthur Murphy, the playwright and actor. Henry Thrale, the wealthy brewer, and his lovely wife Hester took Johnson to their hearts and let him make their spacious place at Streatham Park, on the outskirts of London, as well as their home in Southwark, his headquarters. Here he dined in luxury, met the famous folk of the day, and was pampered and adored by the wits and fashionable persons who partook of the Thrale hospitality. When he became ill, Mrs. Thrale insisted that he stay with them altogether for the comforts her household staff could give him. Here he was tenderly nursed back to health on a number of occasions. Her sprightly Anecdotes give many intimate details of their association and show with what patience she ministered to him and put up with his eccentricities. She always had great respect for him, however, for his piety, his charity, and moral character. She ends her book by remarking:

---

33 Ibid., 378-379.

> The mind of this man was indeed expanded beyond the common limits of human nature, and stored with such variety of knowledge, that I used to think it resembled a royal pleasure-ground, where every plant of every name and nation, flourished in the full perfection of their powers, and where, though lofty woods and falling cataracts first caught the eye, and fixed the earliest attention of beholders, yet neither the trim parterre, nor the pleasing shrubbery, nor even the antiquated evergreens, were denied a place in some fit corner of the happy valley.[34]

For nearly twenty years Johnson enjoyed the hospitality of the Thrales, traveled with them to Wales and France, and shared in their joys and sorrows. Here he had more or less a normal family life, as there were a number of children in the Thrale household; and he became especially fond of Queeney, the eldest daughter, to whom he always wrote letters when away from London. Johnson called children "pretty dear's," and enjoyed talking to them. It was a great blow to Johnson when in 1781 Henry Thrale died, and the intimate family circle disintegrated. Mrs. Thrale closed the big house at Streatham and took up a less elaborate scheme of living, which made no provision for Johnson. He was now old, sick, and often ill-tempered, and she found it difficult to cope with him without the help of her husband.

Hester Thrale was still a young woman, only thirty-nine, and she had no intention of retiring for the rest of her life. Henry Thrale, who was fourteen years her senior, had been

---

34 Thrale-Piozzi, Anecdotes, 195.

a stern character, with little sentiment or gayety in his make-up. His wife, a vivacious loving person, though she had everything that money could buy, missed much of real love and companionship in her life with him. Soon it became apparent to her friends that Signor Gabriel Piozzi, an Italian singer, whose acquaintance she had made when she engaged him to give lessons to her daughter, had become warmly attached to her; and she returned his sentiments. When she informed Johnson that she intended to marry Piozzi, he was dumbfounded and wrote her a sharp letter, asking her not to desert her friends or family. A number of letters was exchanged on both sides, and the correspondence has since been published, adding an interesting end to the Dr. Johnson-Mrs. Thrale relationship. In spite of his disappointment at the turn of events, he was big enough to wish her well, saying in one of these last letters:

> I wish that God may grant you every blessing, that you may be happy in this world for its short continuance, and eternally happy in a better state; and whatever I can contribute to your happiness I am very ready to repay, for that kindness which soothed twenty years of a life radically wretched.[35]

Johnson went back to his own quarters, and took up a new lonesome life. His health was poor and the old gusto had vanished. Before the year was over, death, which he feared so much, came to him and he went to meet his Creator, resigned at last.

---

35 Letters, II, 407.

Johnson, of course, repaid the Thrales for their hospitality. He was a literary lion and was a great prize for the socially ambitious Mrs. Thrale to exhibit before the many famous persons who frequented her hospitable home. Now her name will live for all time because of her connection with the Johnson circle; and her diary and Anecdotes have a place in all libraries.

All the while Johnson lived at the Thrales' home, he kept his own establishment in London, in which he housed and fed a number of old friends and acquaintances who had no other home but his. He returned to them on Saturdays, fed them well, settled the many differences that were bound to arise among so many odd assorted characters, and then went back to the Thrales on Monday night for another big week of talk and feasting with the great. In her Anecdotes Mrs. Thrale remarks that he:

> treated them with the same or perhaps more ceremonious civility than he would have done by as many people of fashion, making the holy scriptures thus the rule of his conduct, and only expecting salvation, as he was able to obey its precepts.[36]
>
> . . . . . .
>
> No one had however higher notions of the hard task of Christianity than Johnson whose daily terror lest he had not done enough, originated in piety, but ended in little less than disease.[37]

Johnson also looked after the moral life of his serv-

---

36 Thrale-Piozzi, Anecdotes, 57.

37 Ibid., 74.

ants and household friends, said night prayers with them, and saw that they went to church on Sunday. He was especially watchful over the soul of his negro servant, Frank Barber, who was in his service a long time and was present at his death. Johnson sent him away to school, wrote letters to him, and treated him as he would a son. At his death he left him a substantial pension.

In October of 1765 the edition of Shakespeare was given to the world. The Preface is well known and justly famous, as it shows Johnson in his favorite role of critic, moralizing and denouncing, and giving his own opinions, that are often unique.

In 1773 in company with Boswell he made a three months' tour of the Western Islands of Scotland. Both Johnson and Boswell wrote an account of the tour. Johnson's, of course, differs from Boswell's, in that he discusses things in a more philosophic vein. He gives many views upon religion and mankind in general, which the wild scenes and the simple-hearted people of these remote districts called forth. The islands contained numerous ruins of old-time abbeys and cathedrals. Boswell remarks that Johnson always took off his hat when he was on any part of the ground where a cathedral had stood. Here it was, too, that Johnson refused to attend a Presbyterian church, as he felt there was something lacking when there were no bishops to ordain the ministers, as in his own church.

In 1774 he toured Wales with the Thrales. He kept a diary and wrote letters to friends back home, which contain interesting observations of incidents and persons encountered on the journey.

The next year the Thrales took him with them on their visit to France, where they spent time in a number of cities, including Calais, Rouen, Chantilly, Paris, and others. In Paris Johnson met the English Benedictines with whom he enjoyed stimulating conversation, and this seemed a high point in his trip, as he referred to them frequently later.

As usual, while traveling he wrote many letters to friends at home and to members of his household, telling of what he had seen in the strange places. He visited many of the churches and palaces and found them magnificent. It is likely that Dr. Johnson meant to write a book about his French journey as he left many notes, some of this Boswell inserted in the Life.

Johnson always had a great curiosity about monks and members of religious orders. One of his notes reads:

> We walked to a small convent of the Fathers of the Oratory. In the reading desk of the refectory lay The Lives of the Saints.[38]
>
> Monk not necessarily a priest. Benedictines arise at four, are at church an hour and a half; at church again half an

---

38 Life, 551.

hour before, half an hour after dinner, and again from half an hour after seven to eight. They may sleep eight hours. Bodily labor wanted in monasteries.[39]

Oct. 25. Wednesday. I went with the Prior to St. Cloud, to see Dr. Hooke. We walked round the palace, and had some talk.--I dined with our whole company at the monastery.[40]

Oct. 31. Tuesday. I lived at the Benedictines; meagre day, soup meagre, herrings, eels, both with sauces; fryed fish; lentils tasteless in themselves..... I parted very tenderly from the Prior and Friar Wilkes.[41]

Later in giving Boswell details of his trip he said he was treated very kindly by the Benedictines, and had a cell appropriated to him in their convent whenever he cared to visit them.

Mrs. Thrale relates in her Anecdotes that the Abbe Roffette and Johnson met at Rouen, charmed each other at their first meeting, and enjoyed a long conversation in Latin. She says:

The Abbe arose and embraced the Doctor in a transport. Mr. Thrale who was present thought it only polite to invite the Abbe to Streatham to continue the delightful symposia. Johnson turned on Mr. Thrale for inviting a man he knew nothing about. The Abbe took his leave and was heard no more of by any of them.[42]

---

39 Ibid., 552.

40 Ibid., 557.

41 Ibid., 559.

42 Thrale-Piozzi, Anecdotes, 67.

Johnson could be very contrary at times, and a trial to those who were kind to him; but virtues of humility, morality, and goodness of heart, outweighed his petty weaknesses, with the result that no one took offense.

Boswell was not a constant companion of Johnson. He had his family in Scotland and his profession of law to follow, but he managed to come to London at least once a year, with the exception of twice when more than a year elapsed before these two good friends saw each other. Frequent letters were, of course exchanged, in which they discussed at length various topics. Boswell was always in need of advice on some problem, and Johnson the lonesome man, wanted friendship and companionship, which a letter helped to give when the writer was absent.

Such was this good man, Samuel Johnson, a man with hundreds of friends, but withal a lonely heart. It will be seen that love of God and of his fellow creatures were two marked characteristics of Johnson. It is not strange that religion should have colored Johnson's views on many questions and played an important part in his life, for his very beginning on this earth was associated with the church. He was born in a Cathedral town within hearing of the lovely chimes. Another church, St. Mary's, was but a few steps from his home. Having been brought to St. Mary's on the first day of his life to be baptized, he received God's blessing before his eyes were open to the glare of

the world that was later to amaze him with its lack of religion.

He had the good fortune of having pious parents, who were strict and god-fearing. His first lessons were from the prayer book, and his remarkable memory is attributed to the fact that at an early age he had to memorize the Collect of the day. Before he was able to read, his mother read it to him until he learned it by heart.

It will be remembered that as Johnson grew to manhood his indolent nature caused him to become lax in church attendance and of his religious duties. A copy of Law's Serious Call, the wonderful book that inspired Newman and many other great souls, was put into his hands. A reading of it awakened his religious sense, and caused him to become more assiduous than ever to live the Christian life.

Because Johnson was obliged to observe Sunday in a strict manner by his parents, he never forgot this training; and all his life Sunday was a day of special devotion, in which he preferred to read works of a religious nature only.

As the twig is bent, so is the tree inclined, may be very aptly applied to Samuel Johnson. His innate religious sense was strengthened by the Christian training and associations of his childhood. He followed a straight path all his life in the hope that he would secure his salvation and be acceptable to his Creator when the final summons came.

CHAPTER II

DR. JOHNSON'S DEATH AND VIEWS ON DEATH

Samuel Johnson was a courageous man who feared no one or no bodily danger. Many stories are told of his bravery and of his physical prowess in handling persons who took advantage of him. One great fear threw a shadow over his life, however, and that was the fear of death which was ever present in his mind. He felt that the fear of death was so natural to man that the whole of life is but keeping away the thoughts of it. No matter how hard or bitter life was, it was better than annihilation. His tones became low and earnest when he talked of death. Meditating upon the subject one time with Boswell, he said, "I know not whether I would wish to have a friend before me, or have it all between God and myself."[1]

Next to talking about the delights of London life, the one topic that Boswell and Johnson reverted to most was this fear of death and all angles connected with it from a religious standpoint.

---

1 Life, 357.

The thought often came to Boswell that some day their pleasant intimacy would be broken by the death of one of them. He spoke of this one time to Johnson. "Yes," said Johnson, "that is an affecting consideration."

Boswell: The hope that we shall see our departed friends again must support the mind.

Johnson: Why, yes, sir.

Boswell: There is a strange unwillingness to part with life, independent of serious fears as to futurity. A reverend friend of ours (naming him) tells me that he feels an uneasiness at the thought of leaving his house, his study, his books.

Johnson: This is foolish in *****. A man need not be uneasy on these grounds, for, as he will still retain his consciousness, he must say with the philosopher, Omnia mea mecum porto.

Boswell: True, sir, we may carry our books in our heads; but still there is something painful in the thought of leaving forever what has given us pleasure.[2]

In spite of his licentious ways when young, Boswell also had a religious strain in him, hidden under his gayety and vivacious manner. He often got into a serious and sentimental mood, and liked nothing better than to talk religion with Johnson if the Doctor was in the right frame of mind.

When a young man during his college days at Glasgow University, Boswell became a Catholic; but his father, a strict

---

2 Ibid., 319-320.

Scotch Presbyterian, put a quick end to that phase of his career. Ever after, however, he spoke of his Popish hankerings. He was like Johnson in the respect that anything Roman Catholic had a strong fascination for him. Since Johnson had a very sympathetic and intelligent attitude toward Catholicism, he was able to enlighten Boswell on many points of doctrine that he brought up.

In his book Account of Corsica, Boswell tells of his experiences while in Corsica when he stayed at various monasteries because there were no hotels in some of the towns. He has many fine philosophic passages which show his religious understanding. In one place he says:

> The religious who devoutedly endeavor 'to walk with God' are often treated with raillery by those whom pleasure of business prevents from thinking of the future and more exalted objects. A little experience of the serenity and peace of mind found in convents would be of use to temper the fire of men of the world.[3]

Had Boswell been a good Catholic born and bred, he might have been able to influence Johnson in religious matters and might have guided his steps toward the Catholic Church, for the great man had a special place in his heart for Catholics and was remarkably conversant with Catholic customs and practice. Although this is merely speculation, he might have received in the Catholic Church the comfort and peace of mind that his own reli-

---

3 James Boswell, Account of Corsica, London, 1768, 279.

gion failed to bring him. Johnson loved truth above all things; and, if he had been a Catholic and convinced that his religion was the only true one, as Catholics are, it is certain that his observance of it would have added greatly to his tranquility of soul. In following Catholic precepts faithfully, he could with more certainty have hoped to reach the heavenly goal that he was striving for.

Johnson had many Catholic friends among the clergy and laity. He was very intimate with the Rev. Thomas Hussey, D. D., His Catholic Majesty's Chaplain of Embassy at the Court of London. A number of the Literary Club members were Catholics, too, such as Sir Joshua Reynolds, Arthur Murphy, the actor, and Dr. Christopher Nugent, the father-in-law of Edmund Burke. It is true some of them were lukewarm in their practice, and others who were reared as Catholics and went to Catholic schools, had given up Catholicism entirely. The chapter entitled, "Dr. Johnson's Catholic friends," in Robert Bracey's book[4] lists numerous Catholic persons known intimately by Johnson. The Doctor had many opportunities to get information on points of Catholic doctrine he did not understand. One wonders did he ever attend Mass? In his account of the Gordon riots as related by Boswell, he

---

4 Robert Bracey, O.P., Eighteenth Century Studies, London, 1925, 1-9.

speaks of the mass house near Lincoln fields. Of course this was a dark period in the history of the English Catholic Church. Catholics were quiet and cautious, and Catholic friends who might have liked to talk with him held their silence. The good Doctor, however, seemed to have had a yearning for the certitude and peace which the true faith gives. In spite of his sincere gropings, the answer eluded him; and his entire life was a lonely search.

In her Anecdotes, Mrs. Thrale tells something that would cast doubt on Johnson's warm leaning toward the Catholic Church. She speaks of him as a most unshaken Church of England man and remarks:

> I think, or at least I once did think, that a letter written by him to Mr. Barnard, the king's librarian, when he was in Italy collecting books, contained some very particular advice to his friend to be on his guard against the seductions of the church of Rome.[5]

In the Hill collection of Johnson's letters, there is a letter written by Dr. Johnson to Dr. Barnard, which, from its contents appears to be the one Mrs. Thrale refers to. She, however, put a different interpretation upon the Doctor's advice than his words seem to call for. The statement she refers to, no doubt, is this:

> One advice more I will give you, of more importance than all the rest, and which I, therefore, hope you will

---

5 Thrale-Piozzi, Anecdotes, 62.

> still less need. You are going into a part of the world divided, as it is said, between bigotry and atheism; such representations are always hyperbolical, but there is certainly enough of both to alarm any mind solicitous for piety and truth; let not the contempt of superstition precipitate you into infidelity, or the horror of infidelity ensnare you in superstition.[6]

Though Johnson was, as Mrs. Thrale says, a most unshaken Church of England man, it is known that he bestowed his blessing upon anyone who changed his religion if he acted according to the dictates of his conscience. One recalls his fervent "God bless him!" spoken to Mrs. Kennicot at the time she told him that her brother, the Reverend Mr. Chamberlayne had left the Church of England to embrace Catholicism.[7]

Boswell often was preoccupied with thoughts of life after death, and knowing Johnson's concern about these matters, questioned him on the subject frequently. He was very careful and coy in starting his questioning, for Johnson did not like to be interrogated point blank.

Johnson gave sound advice to Boswell on his many problems. He took him to church with him and taught him the joy of a moral life. He also insisted that he not neglect his prayers, that he count his blessings, and give thanks to his Creator for favoring him with a good wife and family.

---

6 Letters, I, 147.

7 Life, 1102.

One time Boswell finding Johnson in good humor led him to the subject of our situation in a future state, as he was anxious to see what he would say.

> Johnson: Why, Sir, the happiness of an unembodied spirit will consist in a consciousness of the favor of God, in the contemplation of truth, and in the possession of felicitating ideas.
>
> Boswell: Is there any harm in forming to ourselves conjectures as to the particulars of our happiness though the Scriptures have said very little on the subject? We know not what we shall be.
>
> Johnson: Sir, there is no harm. What philosophy suggests to us on this topic is probable, what Scripture tells us is certain.[3]

Johnson said he did not think all things would be made clear to us immediately after death, but that the ways of Providence would be explained to us very gradually. Not all people will have the same degree of happiness in heaven, too, he felt.

Boswell maintained that the fear of death might be conquered if one tried. He went on to say that David Hume told him he was no more uneasy to think that he would not be after this life than he had not been before he began to exist.

This statement provoked Johnson's powers of eloquence. Hume, a man without religion, was a terrible creature in Johnson's eyes. Very excitedly he replied:

> Sir, if he really thinks so, his perceptions are disturbed; he is mad. If he does not think so, he lies. He may tell

---

3 Ibid., 404.

> you he holds his finger in the flame of a candle, without feeling pain. Would you believe him? When a man dies he at least gives up all he has.
> . . . . . .
> But, may we not fortify ourselves against the approach of death, Boswell went on.
> No, sir, let it alone. It matters not how a man dies, but how he lives.[9]

Boswell mentioned that David Hume's persisting in his infidelity when he was dying shocked him very much. "Why should it shock you, sir?" Johnson retorted. "Hume owned he never read the New Testament with attention. Here then was a man who had been at no pains to inquire into the truth of religion, and had continually turned his mind the other way. It was not to be expected that God would alter his way of thinking unless God could send an angel to set him right.[10]

Johnson remarked that it has been observed that any man who dies in public does so with apparent resolution. This is because the desire of praise is very strong in every one, and never leaves us. A criminal will walk to the scaffold like a soldier, so that it may be said he died like a man.[11]

Another time Johnson observed that the better a man is, the more afraid he is of death, having a clearer view of infinite

---

9 Ibid., 366.

10 Ibid., 716.

11 Ibid., 717.

purity. He owned that being in an unhappy uncertainty as to our salvation was mysterious, and said we must wait until we are in another state of being to have many things explained to us.[12]

In his poem Vanity of Human Wishes written when Johnson was in a poetic mood, he supposed death to be "kind Nature's signal for retreat from this state of being to a happier state," [13] but in every day life when not under the influence of the muse, his thoughts were full of dismal apprehensions.

He tried his best to be brave, for the act of dying is not of importance. "It lasts so short a time," he said. "A man knows it must be so, and submits. It will do him no good to whine."[14] Johnson did show courage on his own death bed in spite of his fears, and prayed continuously while he was able to utter the words.

They were talking about death one day in company of Mrs. Knowles, the lively Quaker lady we meet in the Life occasionally. Boswell expressed a horror at he thought of death. Mrs. Knowles said, "Nay, thou shouldst not have a horror for what is the gate of life. The Scriptures tell us the righteous shall have hope in his death."

---

12 Life, 717.

13 The Poems of Samuel Johnson, ed., D. Nichol Smith, Oxford, 1941, 48.

14 Life, 366.

Johnson: Yes, Madam, he shall not have despair, But consider; his hope of salvation must be founded on the terms on which it is promised that the mediation of our Saviour shall be applied to us--namely, obedience; and where obedience has failed, then, as supplementary to it, repentance. But what man can say that his obedience has been such, as he would approve of in another, or even in himself upon close examination, or that his repentance has not been such as to require being repented of? No man can be sure that his obedience and repentance will obtain salvation.

Mrs. Knowles: But Divine intimation of acceptance may be made to the soul.

Johnson: Madam, it may be; but I should not think the better of a man who should tell me on his death bed he was sure of salvation.

Boswell: Then, Sir, we must be content to acknowledge that death is a terrible thing.

Johnson: Yes, Sir. 15

On a visit once to Dr. Adams, his old tutor at Pembroke College, the conversation turned to the subject of death. Dr. Adams remarked that God was infinitely good. Johnson replied:

That he is infinitely good as far as the perfection of his nature will allow, I firmly believe, but it is necessary for the good of the whole that individuals should be punished. As to an individual, therefore, he is not infinitely good, and I cannot be sure that I have fulfilled the conditions on which salvation is granted. I am afraid I may be one of those who would be damned.

Dr. Adams: What doyou mean by damned?

Johnson: (passionately and loudly) Sent to Hell, Sir, and punished everlastingly.16

---

15 Ibid., 809.

16 Ibid., 1109.

In explanation of the reason why some persons do not seem to fear death, Johnson replied:

> Some people are not afraid because they look upon salvation as the effect of an absolute decree, and think they feel in themselves the marks of sanctification. Others, and those the most rational in my opinion, look upon salvation as conditional; and as they never can be sure that they have complied with the conditions, they are afraid.[17]

Much has been said about Johnson's belief in ghosts, and many persons wrongly think him to have possessed great credulity on this subject. He maintained that a total disbelief in spirits is adverse to the opinion of the existence of the soul between death and the last day, and the question simply is whether departed spirits ever have the power of making themselves perceptible to us. This topic is touched upon in Rasselas in a very poetic way when Imlac says:

> That the dead are seen no more, I will not undertake to maintain, against the concurrent and unvaried testimony of all ages, and of all nations. There is no people, rude or learned, among whom apparitions of the dead are not related and believed. This opinion, which perhaps prevails as far as human nature is diffused could become universal only by its truth; those that never heard of one another, would not have agreed in a tale which nothing but experience can make credible. That it is doubted by single cavillers, can very little weaken the general evidence; and some who deny it with their tongues, confess it by their fears.[18]

Boswell tried to explain Johnson's supposed credulity on the subject of ghosts by saying that he had a very philosophic

---

17 Ibid., 1096.

18 Works, IV, 99.

mind and such a rational respect for testimony as to make him submit his understanding to what was authentically proved, though he could not comprehend why it was so. He was not the dupe of implicit faith, but he examined any matter with great attention and was not slow in refuting its falsehood when he discovered it. Readers of the Life know the story of the Cock Lane ghost, which occupied the attention of the London populace in 1762, and what great trouble Johnson went to in investigating it. They also know how he and his fellow investigators exposed it and showed up the whole false performance.[19]

Second sight, too, was a subject that engaged his attention. Mrs. Williams, at whose home he drank tea, no matter how late the hour, before going to his own quarters at the end of the evening, once told him a story of second sight which happened in Wales, where she was born. He listened with interest, remarking that he would like to see instances of this faculty authenticated. Boswell observes:

> His elevated wish for more and more evidence for belief in spirit in opposition to the growing belief of materialism, led him to a love of such mysterious disquisitions. He again justly observed that we could have no certainty of the truth of supernatural appearances, unless something was told us which we could not believe by ordinary means, or something done which could not be done but by supernatural power.[20]

---

19 Life, 247.

20 Ibid., 397.

When on their tour of the islands of Scotland, Boswell and Johnson heard many stories of second sight which caused them to believe in this phenomenom, much to the ridicule of the members of the Literary Club when it became known.

The subject of witchcraft was introduced when visiting with some of the islanders who were entertaining them on this journey. Mr. Crosbie, an advocate, said he thought it the greatest blasphemy to suppose evil creatures counteracting the Deity and raising storms, for instance, to destroy His creatures. Johnson said, "If moral evil be consistent with the government of the Deity, why might not physical evil be also consistent with it? It is not more strange that there should be evil spirits than evil men; evil unembodied spirits than evil embodied spirits And as to storms, it is no worse that evil spirits raise them, than that they rise."[21]

Boswell queried once what was properly meant by witches. Johnson replied that they mean those who make use of the aid of evil spirits. "There is no doubt, Sir, a general report and belief of their having existed," Boswell went on. "You have not only the general report and belief, but you have voluntary solemn confessions," replied Johnson.[22]

---

21 James Boswell, Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides, New York, 1936, 27-28.

22 Life, 415.

Johnson was miserably ill in his last few years. He was scarcely able to walk because of dropsy and found it difficult to breathe owing to asthma, but he kept up his interest in life. To relieve his lonesomeness, he formed another supper club in 1783, the year before he died, and a number of his friends joined. He wrote out the rules governing theclub himself.

The old friends whom he sheltered in his home were dying one by one, and the others were old and sick and no comfort to him. Mrs. Williams and Dr. Levett, whom he liked especially, were gone, and life in his house was gloomy. He held up his head, as he said, and in letters to friends always thanked God for letting him enjoy life thus far.

Boswell and other of his friends who thought that Italy might be a milder climate for him, endeavored to get an increase in his pension so that he could go there and enjoy the comfort that a man of his fame was entitled to. They were unsuccessful, but many offered privately to assist him. Johnson was very much touched by the solicitude of his friends. "This is taking prodigious pains about a man," he said to Boswell. Boswell replied: "Oh, Sir, your friends would doanything for you." He then reports the scene very touchingly.

> He paused, grew more and more agitated, till tears started into his eyes. I was so affected that I also shed tears. After a short silence he renewed and extended his grateful benediction, 'God bless you all for Jesus Christ's sake.'

We both remained for some time unable to speak.[23]

This scene is particularly affecting, because it was the last time Boswell was ever under Johnson's roof. The next day, Wednesday, June 30, 1784, these two friends dined at Sir Joshua Reynolds' home. No other company was present, and they had a quiet pleasant evening. It proved, however, to be the last time that Boswell was ever to see or enjoy the conversation of his revered friend. Boswell would certainly have treasured each word that passed that evening, if he had known what an eventful night it would prove in his life.

In July of this last year, Johnson ordered a stone to be placed on his wife's grave in Bromley, Kent. She now had been dead thirty years. He hoped to be able to visit Bromley once again, but this journey of respect to the memory of his wife was denied him.

He now set out on his last trip to Lichfield, as he thought the air there might benefit him. While away, he kept up a correspondence with several London friends. The letters are for the most part gloomy, since they contain reference to his many maladies. He tried to keep up his spirits by some such remark as this, "Though I cannot talk of health, I think all praise due to my Creator and Preserver for the continuance of my life."

Before returning to London, Johnson visited Oxford and

---

23 Ibid., 1133.

stayed a few days with his friend Dr. Adams, master of Pembroke College. Here he enjoyed the type of serious conversation he liked in surroundings memorable of younger days. He returned to London on the sixteenth of November.

Johnson kept a journal in Latin of the state of his illness, written with great care from July 6th to November 8th. When he wrote to his physician Dr. Lawrence regarding his ailment he also used Latin.

He had some premonition that his end was not far off, and though the asthma and dropsy made his body a torture, he clung to life tenaciously and kept his pen busy. Just a few days before his death he sent to Mr. John Nichols, his friend, a long list of the authors of the Universal History, showing their several shares in the work. This list is now in the British Museum.

On December 2, 1784, he wrote this letter to his stepdaughter Lucy Porter in Lichfield:

> Dear Madam:
>
> I am very ill and desire your prayers. I have sent Mr. Green the Epitaph, and power to call on you for ten pounds.
> I laid this summer a stone over Tetty in the chapel of Bromley in Kent.
> That this is done, I thought it fit that you should know. What care will be taken of us, who can tell? May God pardon and bless us, for Jesus Christ's sake. I am,[24]

---

24 Ibid., 1175.

The epitaph he referred to was for his father, mother, and brother, which was to be engraved, and the stone laid in the middle aisle in St. Michael's Church, Lichfield. He wrote specific instructions to Mr. Green at Lichfield, saying "and I beg that all possible haste may be made, for I wish to have it done while I am yet alive."[25]

To while away the time during his sick sleepless nights, Johnson translated from Greek into Latin verse many of the epigrams in the Anthologia.

Boswell was not present at the death scene, but he collected personal accounts from many who were there. Johnson's last days were spent in his house at Bolt Court, surrounded by friends, and his faithful servant, Frank Barber.

He had never gotten around to making his will, because of the common aversion to attention regarding this detail when one is strong and death seems far off. Sir John Hawkins urged him to make his will at once while his mind was clear. Accordingly this was done on December eighth and ninth, the time of his last illness. Characteristic of him, the will embodies these words: "I bequeath to God, a soul polluted with many sins, but I hope purified by Jesus Christ."[26] As he had no close relatives, he provided handsomely for his favorite friend and servant of many years, Francis Barber, leaving him an annuity

---

25 Ibid., 1175.
26 Ibid., 1181.

of seventy pounds a year.

Dr. Brocklesby, one of the attending physicians, said:

> For some time before his death, all his fears were calmed and absorbed by the prevalence of his faith, and his trust in the merits and propitiation of Jesus Christ.
> He talked often to me about the necessity of faith in the sacrifice of Jesus as necessary beyond all good works for the salvation of mankind.[27]

Before he received the Holy Sacrament on his dying bed, Johnson composed this prayer:

> Almighty and most merciful Father, I am now as to human eyes it seems, about to commemorate, for the last time, the death of Thy Son, Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Redeemer. Grant O Lord, that my whole hope and confidence may be in his merits, and thy mercy; enforce and accept my imperfect repentance; make this commemoration available to the confirmation of my faith, the establishment of my hope, and the enlargement of my charity; and make the death of Thy Son Jesus Christ effectual tomy redemption. Have mercy upon me and pardon the multitude of my offences. Bless my friends; have mercy upon all men. Support me, by Thy Holy Spirit, in the days of weakness, and at the hour of death, to everlasting happiness, for the sake of Jesus Christ. Amen.[28]

Mr. John Nichols gave to Boswell this account of Johnson's last illness:

> It was his regular practice to have the church-service read to him by some friendly Divine. The Rev. Mr. Hoole performed this kind office in my presence for the last time, when by his own desire, no more than the Litany was read; in which his responses were in the deep and sonorous voice which Mr. Boswell has occasionally noticed, and with the most profound devotion that can be imagined. His hearing not being quite perfect, he more

---

27 Ibid., 1190.

28 Ibid., 1191.

> than once interrupted Mr. Hoole with, 'Louder, my dear Sir, louder, I entreat you, or you pray in vain!'-- and when the service was ended, he, with great earnestness, turned round to an excellent lady who was present, saying, 'I thank you, Madam, very heartily, for your kindness in joining me in this solemn exercise. Live well I conjure you; and you will not feel the compunction at the last, which I now feel.'[29]

Upon asking where he should be buried, he seemed pleased when Sir John Hawkins answered, "Doubtless, in Westminster Abbey."

When Dr. Brocklesby, his physician, told him on his solicitation to know the truth, that he would not recover, Johnson then said, "I will take no more physic, not even any opiates; for I have prayed that I may render up my soul to God unclouded." The only sustenance he received was cider and water.

Another eye witness of Johnson's last hours was Boswell's brother, Thomas David, who said:

> The Doctor from the time he was certain that his death was near, appeared to be perfectly resigned, was seldom or ever fretful or out of temper. During this time he cautioned his servant, Francis Barber, to attend to the salvation of his soul, which is the object of greatest importance. He also explained to him passages in the Scripture, and seemed to have pleasure in talking upon religious subjects.[30]

Johnson's last day on earth was the 13th of December, 1784. He was in great pain, and every hour he was assisted to sit up in bed and move his legs, at which times he prayed fervently. His voice was weak but his mind was clear as ever. He was now resigned, but the time to the end seemed long.

---

29 Ibid., 1187.

30 Ibid., 1191.

Johnson requested three things of Sir Joshua Reynolds[31] on his dying bed:

> To forgive him the thirty pounds which he had borrowed of him.
> To read the Bible.
> Never to paint on Sunday.

The last words Johnson spoke were, "God bless you, my dear." These were in reply to the greeting of a Miss Morris, daughter of a particular friend of his, who called on the last day of his life and begged to be allowed to see him and ask his blessing. As she reached the bed, Dr. Johnson turned himself and said these words, which seem appropriate coming from a great figure who all his life lived under the shadow of the presence of God.

Johnson was buried in Westminster Abbey on Monday, December 20, 1784.

It will be seen that, although the fear of death was present in Johnson's mind from his earliest days, he met it calmly when it came. Though death was a subject distasteful to him, he did not shy away from a contemplation of it, but rather dwelt upon it often, and meditated how he could best spend his days so that when the end came, he would be ready. He never made any pretense of concealing his fear of death. He thought it a natural fear that was present with all. He once remarked that he would not think the better of a man who on his death bed would say he

---

31 Ibid., 1189.

was not afraid. Still, in spite of his dread, when the shadow of death was at last upon Johnson, he was able to recognize that what was near was something divine, an angel from Heaven. Courage was given to him, and in serene composure he passed beyond mankind. As Christopher Hollis remarks:

> Perhaps his fears in this life were the punishment with which God afflicted him for those things in which he fell short of 'perfect charity,' the charity which alone 'casteth out fear.'[32]

When very young Johnson learned to pray, and this practice became a habit with him. He relied upon prayer to give him strength to cope with whatever trouble or misfortune befell him. In nearly every prayer he composed he added the plea for mercy when the time came for him to render an account of his time spent upon earth.

Because thoughts of death were constantly in Johnson's mind, it is likely that his actions were such that they would not be held in his disfavor when his last day came. "For the night cometh" were words that he had engraved upon the dial of his watch. He was ever mindful to live his days as a Christian, so that when the great night came, his Savior would say, "well done." Frequent periods of doubt came over him, however. His indolence worried him. He tried to reform and made countless

---

32 Christopher Hollis, Dr. Johnson, London, 1928, 203.

resolutions to change his habits. His spirit was willing, but his fulfillment ranked low. Thus the years went on.

Had Johnson feared death without the comforting help that prayer gave him all his life, his end would not have been as peaceful and edifying as it was.

Johnson was no stranger to death. He had sat at the bedside of many of his dying friends, prayed with them and tried to ease their last moments. Death touched him closely when it robbed him of his wife and left a void in his life that nothing filled. In later years he prayed as old blind Mrs. Williams and Dr. Levett, his household companions of many winters, drew their last breaths. He felt the last flutter of the pulse, as he remarked so vividly, of his friend Henry Thrale. The genial Oliver Goldsmith was taken from him, as was his pupil and friend from early days, David Garrick. He prayed for them all. Prayer was Johnson's first refuge; and he was not ashamed of this side of his character, for prayer gave him strength.

The most touching deathbed scene that Johnson participated in was that of his old nurse, Catherine Chambers, who had lived in his mother's family for many years. She had buried his father, brother, and mother. He was attached to her with strong ties of affection, though she was a simple woman, unlearned in the world of letters or fine manners.

Boswell reports her death scene as related to him by Johnson very vividly. Said Johnson:

> I desired all to withdraw, then told her that we were to part forever; that as Christians, we should part with prayer; and that I would, if she was willing, say a short prayer beside her. She expressed great desire to hear me; and held up her poor hands as she lay in bed, with great fervor; while I prayed, kneeling by her, nearly in the following words:
>
> 'Almighty and merciful Father, whose loving kindness is over all Thy works, behold, visit, and relieve this Thy servant, who is grieved with sickness. Grant that the sense of her weakness may add strength to her faith, and seriousness to her repentance. And grant that by the help of Thy Holy Spirit, after the pains and labors of this short life, we may all obtain everlasting happiness, through Jesus Christ our Lord, for whose sake hear our prayers. Amen.'
>
> I then kissed her. She told me, that to part was the greatest pain that she had ever felt, and that she hoped we should meet again in a better place. I expressed, with swelled eyes, and great emotion of tenderness, the same hopes. We kissed and parted. I humbly hope to meet again, and to part no more.[33]

This scene shows what a tender-hearted man Johnson was and how sincere he was in the practice of his religion. In a sense his own deathbed was sad and lonely. Mrs. Thrale and James Boswell, the two persons who come to mind when one thinks of Dr. Johnson, were not there. Mrs. Thrale had embarked upon a new life for herself, while Boswell, home in Scotland, little dreamed that the earthly days of his revered friend were about to be ended. Francis Barber, his lowly negro servant, and an old lady household companion, Mrs. Desmoulins, were the two in constant attend-

---

33 Life, 330-331.

ance and saw Johnson's life ebb away, Many of Johnson's old friends had passed on, and those who remained paid respectful visits to the sick room and tried to cheer the dying Doctor. Johnson's gift of talk stayed with him to the end. When Dr. Warren greeted him with the hope that he was better, Johnson said: "No, Sir, you cannot conceive with what acceleration I advance towards death."[34] Mr. Windham arranged Johnson's pillow in order to support him better. Johnson, ever courteous, thanked him and said: "That will do, all that a pillow can do."[35]

Johnson, who all his life was lonely, on his deathbed experienced his first real peace and calm. A sense of the Divine Presence was with him. He prayed while he was able to form the words with his dying lips. So resigned was he at last to meet his Creator, that he refused in his last moments to take any medicine to ease his pain, as he wanted to meet Him with a clear mind in his own natural way. Indeed the time seemed long. At last with God's name on his lips, he rested. He had had a consistent plan to meet death, and it was successful.

One feels with Harry Salpeter that "Whatever the real occasion for fear, he was to some extent what he charged Boswell with being, a moth over the flame, his own tormenter."[36]

---

34 Ibid., 1138.

35 Ibid.

36 Harry Salpeter, Dr. Johnson and Mr. Boswell, New York, 1929, 174.

Many persons have asked themselves that if so great a soul as Samuel Johnson can be lost which of us can be saved? Surely the angel may have said to the soul of Johnson as he said to that of Gerontius:

> It is because
> Then thou didst fear, that now thou
> dost not fear.
> Thou hast forestalled the agony, and so for
> thee the bitterness of death is passed.
> . . . . . .
> That calm and joy uprising in thy soul
> Is first-fruit to thee of thy recompense,
> And heaven begun.[37]

---

37 John Henry Cardinal Newman, The Dream of Gerontius, London, 1914, 17.

CHAPTER III

DR. JOHNSON'S GENERAL ATTITUDE TOWARD RELIGION

Johnson believed religion to be the most important of all subjects. There was to be no gayety in one's relations with God. He referred once to a sermon on devotion by Dr. Blair. "There is one part of it which I disapprove," he said, "and I'd have him correct it, which is that he who does not feel joy in religion is far from the kingdom of Heaven. There are so many good men whose fear of God predominates over their love, it may discourage them. It was rashly said."[1]

Johnson believed the Bible was the inspired word of God, and he read it regularly and urged others to study it with a commentary. "That man," says Hogarth, "is not content with believing the Bible but he fairly resolves, I think, to believe nothing but the Bible."[2] Johnson said it is the most difficult of all books for which the study of a lifetime is not sufficient.

---

1 Life, 837.

2 Thrale-Piozzi, Anecdotes, 90.

Baxter's Reasons for the Christian Religion, he thought, contained the best collection of evidences of the divinity of the Christian system. Any criticism of theological dogma provoked his severest wrath. He said:

> The peculiar doctrine of Christianity is that of an universal sacrifice and perpetual propitiation. Other prophets only proclaimed the will and the threatenings of God. Christ satisfied his justice.[3]

Being born into the Church of England, Johnson adhered strictly to its rules, and he would not consider anything being done to weaken it or to make it more easy for anyone to subscribe to it. One time there was a petition in Parliament for removing the necessity of subscribing to the Thirty-nine Articles. Some thought it was not right to make the young men at the University subscribe to that which they did not understand. Johnson said the act of subscribing is not that they fully understand all the Articles, but that all adhere to the Church of England.

Boswell asked if it would not be sufficient to subscribe to the Bible. "No," answered Johnson, "for all sects will subscribe to the Bible. The Mohammedans will subscribe to the Bible, for the Mohammedans acknowledge Jesus Christ as well as Moses, but maintain that God sent Mohammed as a still greater prophet than either."[4]

---

3 Life, 989.

4 Ibid., 398.

Johnson had often been accused even in his own day both of bigotry and liberality in religion. As evidence of liberality, critics point out that he once said that all Christians whether Papists or Protestants agree in the essential articles, but that their differences are trivial, rather political than religious. He was considered a bigot when he decried atheists and radicals.

One day in Dr. Johnson's presence someone commented on the lack of religion in general, and Dr. Seward, one of the company, wondered why it should be thus. Johnson said we need not wonder about this when we consider how large a portion of every man's life is passed without thinking of religion. He went on:

> I myself was for some years totally regardless of religion. It had dropped out of my mind. It was at an early part of my life. Sickness brought it back, and I hope I have never lost it since.
>
> Boswell: What a man you must have been without religion! Why you must have gone on drinking and swearing.
>
> Johnson: (with a smile) I drank enough and swore enough to be sure.[5]

Boswell was inclined to be a little skeptical at times. He looked to Johnson for reassurance in his doubts. In such a period of reassuring Johnson said to him:

> As to the Christian religion, Sir, besides the strong evidence which we have for it, there is a balance in its favor from the great men who have been convinced of its truth, after a serious consideration of the question. Grotius was

---

5 Ibid., 1051.

> not a recluse, but a man of the world, who certainly had no bias to the side of religion. Sir Isaac Newton set out an infidel and came to be a firm believer.[6]

Johnson could get very much worked up when discussing religion, especially when the subject turned upon the changing of one's belief. One day when Mrs. Knowles, the Quaker lady, was present, the conversation turned to a certain friend who had made such a change. Said Johnson among other things:

> She knew no more of the church which she left nor that which she embraced than she did of the difference between the Copernican and Ptolemaic systems.
>
> Mrs. Knowles: She had the New Testament before her.
>
> Johnson: Madam, she could not understand the New Testament, the most difficult of all books, for which the study of a life time is required.
>
> Mrs. Knowles: It is clear as to essentials.
>
> Johnson: But not as to controversial points. The heathen is easily converted because they had nothing togive up, but we ought not without very strong conviction, indeed, to desert the religion, in which we have been educated. This is the religion given you, in which it may be said Providence has placed you. If you live conscientiously only in that religion you may be safe. But error is dangerous indeed, if you err when you choose a religion for yourself.[7]

Mrs. Knowles then asked if we must go by implicit faith, and Johnson answered that the greatest part of our knowledge is

---

6 Ibid., 274.

7 Ibid., 810-811.

implicit faith. And as to religion he asked, have we heard all that a disciple of Confucius or Mohammed has to say for himself? Johnson then very heatedly attacked the new proselyte in severe terms of reproach, shocking the two ladies by his violence of manner.

At another time Boswell relates this incident, which shows the many facets of Johnson's mind:

> Mrs. Kennicot spoke of her brother, the Rev. Mr. Chamberlayne, who had given up great prospects in the Church of England on his conversion to the Roman Catholic faith. Johnson, who warmly admired every man who acted from a conscientious regard to principle, erroneous or not, exclaimed fervently, 'God bless him.'[8]

Johnson did not believe in salvation by faith alone. "There is no trusting to that crazy piety," he once said. Prayer and good works were all important, too. He was very sincere in his religious practices. Religious exercises, if not performed with the intention to please God, avail us nothing, he thought. As our Savior says of those who perform them from other motives, "Verily they have their reward." The morality of an action, he maintained, depends on the motive from which we act. In explanation he said, "If I fling half a crown to a beggar with the intention to break his head, and he picks it up and buys victuals with it, the physical effect is good; but with respect to me, the

---

8 Ibid., 1102.

action is very wrong."[9]

Speaking of those who denied the truth of Christianity, Johnson said that it is always easy to be on the negative side. He is known to have taken the negative side at times on various arguments just for the sake of perversity or to win an argument and show up his opponent.

Johnson accepted the Christian mysteries as the most real things in life. They were not simply something to conform to; they were, as yesterday and today, as the sun, the moon, and the stars.

Despite the fact that he was living in a rationalistic age, and was somewhat influenced by the same, he had no difficulty in believing in miracles. This topic was often a subject of debate when a company was present to hear the sage, as Boswell calls him, give his opinions. One time someone brought up Hume's argument that it is more probable that the witnesses to the truth of miracles are mistaken or speak falsely, than that the miracles should be true. Johnson said that the great difficulty of proving miracles should make us very cautious in believing them. "Yet, although God has made nature to operate by certain fixed laws, it is not unreasonable to think that He may suspend these laws in order to establish a system highly advantageous to mankind." He maintained that the Christian religion is most bene-

---

9 Ibid., 242.

ficial, as it gives us light and certainty, where we were before in darkness and doubt. The miracles which prove it are attested by men who had no interest in deceiving us. He pointed out that some of them even gave up their lives in confirmation of the truth of the facts which they asserted.[10]

Johnson held that the Christian religion is not proved by miracles alone, but is connected with prophecies, and with the doctrines in confirmation of which the miracles were wrought.

Boswell talked to Johnson once of original sin. Johnson said that whatever is the cause of human corruption, men are evidently and confessedly so corrupt that all the laws of heaven and earth are insufficient to restrain them from crime.

"If a man lived a good life for seven years and then did something wicked, would it render his former religion vain?" queried Boswell once. Johnson thought God would not make a catch of anyone. Such a person will have the reward of his seven years of good life, he felt.[11]

Boswell thought the expression in the burial service, "in the sure and certain hope of a blessed resurrection," too strong to be used indiscriminately. It is often used in cases of persons who did not live truly Christian lives. Johnson replied

---

10 Ibid., 269.

11 Ibid., 1056.

to his questioning thus: "It is sure and certain hope, Sir, not belief."[12] Boswell, however, was not satisfied and thought something less positive would be more proper.

Johnson kept a strict check on himself, and avoided occasions of sin. When his drama Irene was being produced by Garrick at the Drury Lane Theater, Johnson used to go behind the scenes and talk with the show people. He soon discontinued this practice, for he said that the white bosoms of the actresses and their silk stockings excited his amorous propensities.[13]

Boswell always admitted that he had a leaning toward the Roman Catholic Church, and Johnson invariably favored the Catholic side when an argument arose. One day when in the Harwich stage coach a woman passenger talked violently against the Roman Catholics and the Inquisition, Boswell reports that he as well as the rest of the passengers were astonished to find Johnson defending the Inquisition. The Doctor maintained that false doctrine should be checked on its first appearance, that the civil power should unite with the church in punishing those who dared to attack the established religion, and that such only were punished by the Inquisition.[14]

Boswell hired a Bohemian servant in London and decided

---

12 Ibid., 1049.
13 Ibid., 116.
14 Ibid., 282.

to take him to Scotland. He asked Johnson whether the servant's being a Catholic should hinder him from taking him there. Johnson replied, "If he has no objections, you can have none." This answer gave Boswell an opening to pursue his favorite topic. He said, "So, Sir, you are no great enemy to the Roman Catholic religion."

Johnson: No more, Sir, than to the Presbyterian religion. Of the two, I prefer the Popish.

Boswell: How so?

Johnson: The Presbyterians have no church, no apostolic ordination. They have no public worship, nor no form of prayer in which they know they are to join. They go to hear a man pray, and are to judge whether they will join with him.[15]

Another time Boswell questioned the Doctor on the doctrine of Purgatory as believed by the Roman Catholics. Johnson's answer was:

> Why, Sir, it is a very harmless doctrine. They are of the opinion that the generality of mankind are neither so obstinately wicked as to deserve everlasting punishment, nor so good as to merit being admitted into the society of the blessed spirits; and therefore that God is graciously pleased to allow of a middle state, where they may be purified by certain degrees of suffering. You see, Sir, there is nothing unreasonable in this.

Boswell: But then, Sir, their masses for the dead?

Johnson: Why, Sir, if it be once established that there are souls in Purgatory, it is as proper to pray for

---

15 Ibid., 364.

them as for our brethren of mankind who are yet in this life.

Boswell: The idolatry of the Mass?

Johnson: Sir, there is no idolatry in the Mass. They believe God to be there and they adore Him.

Boswell: The worship of Saints?

Johnson: Sir, they do not worship Saints; they invoke them; they only ask their prayers.[16]

Although Johnson was broad in his thinking on other religions, he had the usual current misinformation on many points pertaining to a particular religion. He said once that Purgatory is made a lucrative imposition, and that the people do become idolatrous as they recommend themselves to the tutelary protection of particular saints.

The following question and answer are interesting.

Boswell: What about Confession?

Johnson: Why, I don't know but that it is a good thing. The Scripture says, 'Confess your faults one to another,' and the priests confess as well as the laity.[17]

Johnson was heard once to say that a man who is converted from Protestantism to Popery may be sincere, for he parts with nothing. He is only superadding to what he already had. But a

---

16 Ibid., 365.

17 Ibid.

convert from Popery to Protestantism gives up much of what he has held as sacred as anything that he retains; there is so much laceration of mind in such a conversion that it can hardly be sincere and lasting.

One evening when Boswell went calling on Johnson, they talked of religious orders. Johnson said it is as unreasonable for a man to go into a Carthusian convent for fear of being immoral as for a man to cut off his hands for fear he should steal. he said further:

> There is, indeed, great resolution in the immediate act of dismembering himself; but when that is once done, he has no longer any merit, for though it is out of his power to steal, yet he may all his life be a thief in his heart. So when a man has become a Carthusian, he is obliged to continue so, whether he chooses it or not. Their silence, too, is absurd. We read in the Gospel of the Apostles being sent to preach, but not to hold their tongues. All severity that does not tend to increase good, or prevent evil, is idle. I said to the Lady Abbess of a convent, 'Madam, you are here not for the love of virtue, but the fear of vice.' She said that she would remember this as long as she lived.'[18]

Boswell thought it rather hard to give her this view of her situation when she could not help it. He was puzzled too at the conversation that evening, since in both the Rambler and Idler, Johnson had treated religious austerities with much respect.

One title of a Rambler paper is "Retirement Natural to a Great Mind; Its Religious Use." In this paper Johnson says in

---

18 Ibid., 584.

part:

> The great task of him who conducts his life by the precepts of religion is to make the future predominate over the present, to impress upon his mind so strong a sense of the importance of obedience to the divine will, of the value of the reward promised to virtue, and the terrors of the punishment denounced against crimes, as may overbear all the temptations which temporal hope or fear can bring into his way, and enable him to bid equal defiance to joy and sorrow, to turn away from the allurements of ambition, and push forward at another time against the threats of calamity.[19]

This large order could be carried out in a convent better than in the world which Johnson himself admitted was so wicked, it seems.

Johnson had great respect for places of religious retirement, although he did not always have the correct idea of the life lived therein. "Remember always," said he once to Mrs. Thrale, "that a convent is an idle place and where there is nothing to be done something must be endured."[20]

He probably mistook the peace, serenity, and sense of order that existed in the convents he visited as signifying a lack of things to be done. Everything was always excellently arranged, and the personnel seemed calm and unhurried. His own books and papers were in a state of confusion, covered with dust, and the task of setting them aright was too much to attempt.

Mary Ellen Chase, in A Goodly Fellowship, speaks of the

---

19 Works, I, 41.

20 Thrale-Piozzi, Anecdotes, 62.

celestial machinery that seems to exist in convents whereby innumerable tasks are dispatched with great precision and in a short time. She spent a few summers teaching in the College of St. Catharine on the outskirts of St. Paul, Minnesota, and stayed with the Sisters, though she is not a Catholic. She was greatly impressed and learned much that she had not known before.[21] Johnson, no doubt, failed to observe this celestial machinery. His heart and home always were open to those persons who lived this holy life, however. When two of the English Benedictines he met in Paris were sent to a mission in London, they visited him often at his quarters in Bolt Court. Indeed Johnson spent many happy moments in conversation and correspondence with his Catholic clerical friends and acquaintances, many of whom held high positions in the Church.

The Sunday atmosphere of convents occasioned by extra prayer, frequent attendance at religious services, and a cessation of unnecessary servile work, no doubt would have been highly approved of by Johnson. Because of the strict manner in which Sunday was observed by his parents in his Lichfield boyhood days, a lasting impression was made upon him, with the result that he made a distinction between Sunday and other days of the week during his entire life. He did not think attendance at church was sufficient

---

21 Mary Ellen Chase, A Goodly Fellowship, New York, 1939, 239-240.

One's whole manner should be different. His Sunday dinners at home were sent in already cooked from the public ovens, so that his household helpers could attend divine worship. In spite of what he did, he always thought he fell far short of a truly Christian observance.

Miss Frances Reynolds, sister to Sir Joshua, says in her reminiscence that Johnson always carried a religious treatise in his pocket on a Sunday, and that he used to encourage her to relate to him the particular parts of Scripture she did not understand, and to write them down as they occurred to her in reading the Bible.[22]

This is the series of rules he drew up in 1755 for Sunday observance, and which he followed quite faithfully.

(1) To rise early, and in order to do it, to go to sleep early on Saturday.

(2) To use some extraordinary devotion in the morning.

(3) To examine the tenour of my life, and particularly the last week; and to mark my advances in religion, or recession from it.

(4) To read the Scripture methodically with such helps as are at hand.

(5) To go to church twice.

(6) To read books of divinity, either speculative or practical.

---

22 Johnsoniana, ed. Robina Napier, 342.

(7) To instruct my family.

(8) To wear off by meditation any worldly soil contracted in the week.[23]

One Sunday at the Thrales' home, a friend looking out the window and observing bird catchers busy there, deplored the wickedness of the times which led them to such a sport. Johnson spoke up sharply thus:

> While half the Christian world is permitted to dance and sing and celebrate Sunday as a day of festivity, how comes your puritanical spirit so offended with frivolous and empty deviation from exactness. Whoever loads himself with unnecessary scruples, Sir, continued he, provokes the attention of others on his conduct and incurs the censure of singularity without reaping the reward of superior virtue.[24]

Mrs. Thrale says in explanation that he had a real abhorrence of a person who treated little things like great ones.

Johnson loved the religious days and holidays of the year, as these were times when he examined his shortcomings and made resolutions to lead a better life. He referred to Passion Week as that "awful season," that is, a time of awe and mystery. He would not dine out with any friend during this week, and if he made an engagement by oversight, he canceled it.

He fasted during Lent with a rigor dangerous to his general health. Good Friday was a very solemn day on which he

---

23 Life, 182.

24 Thrale-Piozzi, Anecdotes, 147.

took only black tea. Sometimes he ate a bun with it, so as not to be conspicuous if others were present. He did no writing, nor engaged in any of his usual activities, as he spent most of the day in church. He would not even look at a proof sheet of his Life of Waller brought to him one Good Friday, although the printer was waiting for it. In the intervals between church going he employed himself with devotional exercises. On one Good Friday when Boswell happened to be with him and accompanied him home from church, he gave Boswell a copy of Les Pensees de Pascal, so that he could read it as Johnson studied his book of devotions, and thus not be tempted to talk.

Johnson communicated on Easter, as it was the rule of the church. He was usually very mild and placid on this holy Easter day, and always composed a prayer such as this one:

> Almighty God, by this merciful continuance of my life, I come once more to commemorate the suffering and death of Thy Son, Jesus Christ, and to implore that mercy which for His sake, Thou showest to sinners. Forgive me my sins, O Lord, and enable me to forsake them. Ease, if it shall please Thee, the anxieties of my mind, and relieve the infirmities of my body. O Lord, take not from me Thy Holy Spirit, but receive my petitions, succor and comfort me, and let me so pass the remainder of my days, that when Thou shalt call me hence, I may enter into eternal happiness, through Jesus Christ, Our Lord. Amen.[25]

St. Clement Danes in London was the church Johnson attended most frequently. Now since World War II it is no more,

---

25 Works, VIII, 3.

having been destroyed by bombs. Before that his pew in the north gallery was a favorite tourist sight and was always looked at with reverence.

Robert Bracey, O. P., in his delightful little book remarks it is said that Thomas Carlyle never could pass by St. Clement Danes without thinking with admiration and awe of Samuel Johnson in an era of Voltaire, purging his soul within its walls, sometimes in fear and darkness, and others in quiet meekness, but always with the conviction that the great God was with him and heard his tearful pleas.[26]

Like most persons who value things of the spirit and mind more than those of the body, Johnson was never fastidious or interested in the show and pomp of the world. He maintained that it is our business to exempt ourselves as much as we can from the influence of external things. There is but one solid basis of happiness, he held, and that is the reasonable hope of a happy futurity.

Johnson had great respect for the clergy and was disappointed if they did not conform to his ideas of clerical deportment. Since he expected the highest degree of decorum from Bishops especially, he disapproved of their going to taverns. He said that when a Bishop places himself in a situation where he has

---

26 Bracey, Eighteenth Century Studies, 1.

no distinct character, he degrades the dignity of his order. He considered all the clergy as persons set apart for the sacred office of serving at the altar and impressing the minds of the laity with the concerns of a future state.

Johnson and his friend Topham Beauclerk were once in company with several clergymen who seemed to be a little too noisy and jolly to suit Johnson. They saw Johnson and expected to be introduced to him. He sat silently and paid no attention to them. At last he turned to Beauclerk and said in a fairly loud voice, "This merriment of parsons is mighty offensive."[27]

Even the dress of a clergyman should be in character, Johnson thought, and nothing could be more out of taste than to have him avoid the appearance of clerical order.

Johnson has given us a model clergyman in his picture of Mr. Mudge, who was the Reverend Zachariah Mudge, Prebendary of Exeter. His learning, zeal, manly cheerfulness, and ability all appealed to Johnson. He wrote out of sketch of this reverend gentleman and showed it to Sir Joshua Reynolds and Boswell; but, as it never had been printed anywhere, Boswell inserted it in the Life.[28]

When Johnson and Boswell were traveling in Scotland,

---

27 Life, 959.

28 Ibid., 959-960.

Boswell once remarked as the two travelers were feeling frolicsome:

> Our club should go and set up in St. Andrews as a college to teach all that each of us can in the several departments. Johnson said, 'I'll trust Theology to nobody but myself.'[29]

That Johnson did not enter the Church himself often surprised many of his friends. He possessed many of the attributes one thinks essential to a good clergyman, such as a sincere love of God, high moral principles, kindness to the poor and unfortunate, and a disdain for worldly goods.

The fact is that at one time he was offered a living of considerable value in Lincolnshire, if he would enter into holy orders, but he refused as he did not feel he had the temperament and patience to cope with the many types of people found in a country parish. Besides his love of London life was too strong, and he found it hard to tie himself down to anything definite for a long period.

His great clerical friend was Dr. John Taylor, whom Johnson liked to visit at Ashbourne, where he had a magnificent showplace and lived like a country squire. Johnson was not too much impressed with his religious zeal or care of his flock. He once said "his talk is of bullocks." As Johnson knew many clergymen, it is likely he found them wanting, and received no

---

29 Boswell, A Tour to the Hebrides, 79.

impetus from their example to embrace such a life. The Benedictines at Paris and the monks and other religious orders of the Roman Catholics appealed to him sincerely, and one judges from the remarks as reported by Boswell, that they measured up to his ideal of what a servant in the labor of the Master should be. As we have noted, [pp. 80-82] Johnson did not always understand the reason for the rules that religious people live by. He criticized young people who left the world to pass their lives in prayer. One should leave the world in later years, he felt, after he had done his share of work for the common good. Then again he would contradict himself. Perhaps his feelings were tinged with envy for those who succeeded in living a happy peaceful life away from the busy mart, a life that he so much longed for.

Some of the opinions of Doctor Johnson are puzzling; for instance, he thought the taking of a vow was a terrible thing that should never be done. He said to Boswell once, "Do not accustom yourself to enchain your volatility by vows; they will sometimes leave a thorn in your mind, which you will perhaps never be able to extract."[30] He looked upon a vow as a snare for sin. In his article, "For the Night Cometh," Father E. J. Drummon, S. J., says in this regard:

---

30 Life, 316.

> Perhaps Johnson on some occasion without advice or sufficient deliberation, had thus tried to stabilize his emotions, and had much regretted it. For his character was such with its tendency to a certain scrupulosity, that he might have found the metal of a vow forging itself into a chain, rather than into a supporting rod.[31]

Likely the following explanations made by Johnson more in detail better explain the reason for his antipathy to vows. He and Boswell were talking about a young man who seemed perplexed about a slight difficulty. "Let the man alone, and torment him no more about it; there's a vow in the case I am convinced," said Johnson. "But is it not very strange that people should be neither afraid nor ashamed of bringing in God Almighty thus at every turn between themselves and their dinner!" He mentioned then the case of a young lady who told him that she could never persuade herself to be dressed in time for dinner until she had made a vow to Heaven that she would never more be absent from the family meals.[32] In Johnson's eyes this was making light of the Creator, no doubt. God gave everyone free will and intellect, which should enable one to live with some degree of independence, he felt.

Another time in a letter to Mrs. Thrale under date of May 17, 1773, Johnson says:

> All unnecessary vows are folly, because they suppose a prescience of the future which has not been given us. They

---

31 E. J. Drummond, S. J., "For the Night Cometh," The Catholic World, 155:455, April, 1942.

32 Thrale-Piozzi, Anecdotes, 145.

> are, I think, a crime because they resign that life to chance which God has given us to be regulated by reason; and superinduce a kind of fatality, from which it is the great privilege of our nature to be free.[33]

The correspondence bore reference to a certain young lady who was promised in marriage to someone not of her choice. The following remarks in Johnson's letter refer to that circumstance:

> Unlimited obedience is due only to the universal Father of heaven and earth. My parents may be mad and foolish; may be wicked and malicious; may be erroneously religious, or absurdly scrupulous. I am not bound to compliance with mandates, either positive or negative, which either religion condemns or reason rejects. There wanders about the world a wild notion, which extends over marriage more than over any other transaction.
>
> If Miss ***** followed a trade, would it be said, that she was bound in conscience to give or refuse credit at her father's choice? And is not marriage a thing in which she is more interested, and has, therefore, more right of choice?[34]

It is an exceptionally worthwhile occupation to discover Dr. Johnson's views on many of the moral questions that have puzzled or intrigued searching souls through the ages. Free Will is a topic that in all times has troubled many good persons. Dr. Johnson never had any difficulty. We know our will is free, and that's that, was his attitude. Boswell liked to draw him out on this subject. Said he one day, "It appears to

---

33 Works, IV, 174.

34 Ibid., 175.

me that predestination, or what is equivalent to it, cannot be avoided if we hold an universal prescience in the Deity." Johnson replied, "Why, Sir, does not God every day see things going on without preventing them?" "True, Sir," said Boswell, "but if a thing be certainly foreseen it must be fixed."[35]

Another time when the subject was under discussion, Johnson said:

> You are surer that you are free, than you are of prescience; you are surer that you can lift up your finger or not as you please, than you are of any conclusion from a deduction of reasoning. But let us consider a little objection from prescience. It is certain I am either to go home tonight or not; that does not prevent my freedom.
>
> Boswell: But if one of these events be certain now, you have no future power of volition. If it be certain you are to go home tonight, you must go home.
>
> Johnson: If I am well acquainted with a man, I can judge with great probability how he will act in any case, without his being restrained by my judging. God may have this probability increased to certainty.[36]

Although this is not the traditional Christian or Scholastic view of free future acts, it shows good common sense. The conversation continued in this strain for a long time, and Johnson ended it by saying that all theory is against the freedom of the will; all experience for it.

He held that moral evil was occasioned by free will,

---

35 Life, 364.

36 Ibid., 806-807.

which implies choice between good and evil; yet with all the evil there is no man but would rather be a free agent than a mere machine without the evil, and what is best for each individual must be best for the whole.

It will be noted in summary that Johnson believed religion was one of the most important subjects and that a knowledge and practice of it should predominate in every person's life. He himself was a living example of a truly religious man.

He believed in the Bible, read it frequently, and accepted without question all the divine mysteries and miracles that are part of the knowledge of true Christians.

Holding that this life is but a preparation for the next, he tried to make every act count so that it would not be held against him when the day came that he was to meet his Creator.

He held sacred the religious holidays of the year, and observed Sunday as a special day to be devoted to religious reading and church attendance. He would tolerate no loose language in anyone who had conversation with him, for he himself was careful not to use God's name as an expletive in ordinary talk.

Withal he was no solemn individual mouthing proverbs or exhortations of disasters to come if one did not conform to Christian practice. He could be lighthearted and merry at times. He was human and had his faults, but during his entire life he tried

to overcome them. Often he gave offense by his bluffness of manner but he was big enough at the end of the argument to apologize and seek the pardon of anyone he had offended. Seldom did one go away with ill feeling toward him. He knew his limitations and never made the pretense of being wiser nor better than he was.

Likely he was an example to many in his day because of the way in which he observed the laws of his church. He is still an example to all who read his life and discover how he tried to follow the Christian path in the hopes that it would lead him to celestial peace some day.

In an address delivered on the Johnson bi-centenary celebration at Lichfield on September 15, 1909, Lord Rosebery said:

> Men like this are the stay of religion in their time, and for those who come after. Laymen who hold high and pure the standard of their faith do more for Christianity than a multitude of priests.[37]

---

37 Lord Rosebery, Miscellanies Literary and Historical, London, 1921, I, 57.

CHAPTER IV

DR. JOHNSON AND CHRISTIAN MORALITY

The happiness of society depends on virtue, Johnson maintained, and without truth there would be a dissolution of society. One of his virtues which he practiced all his life, was to tell the truth at all times. He would not allow the slightest deviation from fact. He cautioned Boswell once:

> Accustom your children constantly to this; if a thing happens at one window, and they, when relating it, say that it happened at another, do not let it pass, but instantly check them. You do not know where deviation from truth will end.
> . . . . . .
> It is more from carelessness about truth than from intentional lying, that there is so much falsehood in the world.[1]

Johnson differentiated between physical and moral truth thus:

> Physical truth is when you tell a thing as it actually is. Moral truth is when you tell a thing sincerely and precisely as it appears to you. I say such a one walked across the street; if he really did so, I told a physical truth. If I thought so, though I should be mistaken, I told a moral truth.[2]

---

1 Life, 766.
2 Ibid, 911.

He impressed upon all his friends the importance of constant vigilance against the least inclination to falsehood. The result, as Sir Joshua Reynolds observed once to Boswell, was that all that were of their circle were distinguished for a love of truth, because of their acquaintance with the Doctor.

Like the sincere person he was, Johnson practiced what he preached. He would not allow the servants to say that he was not at home when someone called, if he were busy and would prefer not to be disturbed. He felt that he might thus foster upon them the habit of lying. If he needed to be alone, he would disappear into some corner of the attic; since no one would know where he was, the servants could reply truthfully.

Johnson did not hold a very high opinion of the truthfulness of mankind in general. He remarked once:

> As it is, there is so little truth that we are almost afraid to trust our ears, but how should we be if falsehood were multiplied ten times. Society is held together by communication and information; and I remember this remark of Sir Thomas Browne's, 'Do the devils lie? No; for then Hell could not subsist.'[3]

Boswell often brought up hypothetical cases in order to get Johnson's opinion. He spoke of the young author who showed his verses or story to the eminent writer in the hope of being commended. It was Johnson's contention that the man who is asked by another what he thinks of his work is not obliged to

---

3 Ibid., 808.

speak the truth, "for he is put to torture; so that what he says is not considered as his opinion. Yet he has said it and cannot retract it; and this author when mankind are hunting him with a cannister at his tail can say, 'I would not have published had not Johnson, or Reynolds, or Musgrave, or some other good judge commended the work.' Yet I consider it a very difficult question in conscience, whether one should advise a man not to publish a work, if profit be his object; for the man may say, 'Had it not been for you, I should have had the money.'"[4]

Another time Boswell talked of the casuistical question, "Whether it was allowable at any time to depart from Truth?" Johnson replied that the general rule is that Truth should never be violated, because it is of the utmost importance to the comfort of life that we should have a full security by mutual faith. He held that there must be some exceptions, however. "If, for instance, a murderer should ask you which way a man is gone, you may tell him what is not true, because you are under a previous obligation not to betray a man to a murderer.'[5] Cardinal Newman in his remarks upon the permissibility of lying at times cites Johnson as one English author, among others, in support of his position and repeats this illustration of the murderer as used by Johnson.[6]

---

4 Ibid., 824.
5 Ibid., 1113.
6 John Henry Cardinal Newman, Apologia Pro Vita Sua, New York, 1946, 183.

The greatest of all virtues, charity, was practiced by Johnson in a large way. He was noted for his kindness to the poor, and never passed anyone if he thought a few shillings would add a little joy to the drabness of his life. "What signifies giving alms to them; they only spend it for gin and tobacco, someone remarked to him once. Quickly he retorted, "and why should they be denied such sweetness of their existence. It is surely very savage to refuse them every possible avenue to pleasure, reckoned too coarse for our own acceptance. Life is a pill which none of us can bear to swallow without gilding; yet for the poor we delight in stripping it still barer, and are not ashamed to show even visible displeasure, if ever the bitter taste is taken from their mouths."[7]

Johnson had no love for poverty. He had experienced it himself and knew how soul destroying it is. He held it to be a great enemy to human happiness, as it makes some virtues impracticable and others extremely difficult. Often when coming home from nocturnal ramblings, he used to slip pennies into the hands of sleeping children whom he found curled up in doorways because of no homes, so that they could buy a bun for breakfast on awakening in the morning.

His purse was ever ready to aid distressed authors,

---

7 Hester Thrale-Piozzi, Anecdotes, 57.

and he begged from his friends to help in cases where a large amount was necessary to rehabilitate someone. As is known, too, he kept a roof over a number of dependent persons, made life pleasant as far as possible, took care of them when ill, and gave them a Christian burial when their days were ended. Needless to say he watched over their religious life, cautioned them to say their prayers, read their Bible, and go to church regularly.

Johnson disliked coarseness in language, and particularly swearing. He spent a week on board a man-of-war visiting his friend Captain Knight one time, and was disgusted with the conversation and general conduct of the sailors. One might as well be in jail as spend a life on sea he thought. On asking a ship officer what a certain place was called, he was mortified to be told that it was where the "leplolly man kept his lop-lady."[8]

Boswell wrote a short poem once and used the words "O, by my soul!" Johnson approved of the poem but admonished him for swearing, whereupon Boswell substituted "Alas, Alas!" in the offending line.

When visiting his friend, Dr. Taylor one time, a gentleman farmer was present, and in the course of the conversation remarked that the person under discussion was a <u>damned</u> fool. Johnson said angrily,"He was not a <u>damned</u> fool. He did not

---

8 <u>Ibid</u>., 182.

believe Campbell would be such a damned scoundrel to do such a damned thing." His emphasis on damned, and his frowning look reproved his opponent's lack of decorum in his presence.[9]

Johnson liked virtuous women and held them to stricter accountability in all of life's relations than he did men. He once said, "I wonder that women are not all Papists."

Boswell: They are not more afraid of death than men are.

Johnson: Because they are less wicked.

Dr. Adams: They are more pious.

Johnson: No, hang 'em, they are not more pious. A wicked person is the most pious person when he takes to it. He'll beat you all at piety.[10]

He spoke of adultery as a heinous crime by which the peace of families was destroyed. He said:

> Confusion of progeny constitutes the essence of the crime; and therefore a woman who breaks her marriage vows is much more criminal than a man who does it. A man, to be sure, is criminal in the sight of God; but he does not do his wife a very material injury, if he does not insult her; if, for instance, from mere wantonness of appetite, he steals privately to her chambermaid. Sir, a wife ought not greatly to resent this. I would not receive home a daughter who had run away from her husband on that account. A wife should study to reclaim her husband by more attention to please him. Sir, a man will not, once in a hundred instances leave his wife and go to a harlot, if his wife has not been negligent of pleasing.[11]

---

9 Life 740.

10 Ibid., 1103.

11 Ibid., 337-338.

Johnson surely expected women to display forbearance and broadmindedness to a large degree. Boswell who rightly favored the single standard of virtue, rather unusual in his day, hardly agreed with this view, but he attempted to accept it with this explanation:

> Taking care to keep in view the moral and religious duty, as understood in our nation, he showed clearly from reason and good sense, the greater degree of culpability in the one sex deviating from it than the other; and, at the same time, inculcated a very useful lesson as to the way to keep him.[12]

Boswell thought it rather cruel that one deviation from chastity should ruin and be so detrimental to a young woman's reputation. Johnson did not agree, and maintained that it is the great principle which she is taught, adding "when she has given up that principle, she has given up every notion of female honor and virtue, which are all included in chastity."[13]

Many persons will correctly consider liberal or modern Johnson's views on conjugal infidelity, as in the following instance. Boswell relates that he mentioned a dispute between a friend of his and his lady concerning conjugal unfaithfulness, which the friend had maintained was by no means so bad in a husband as in the wife. Johnson said the friend was in the right, for between a man and his wife a husband's infidelity is nothing.

---

12 Ibid., 338.

13 Ibid.

"The man imposes no bastards upon his wife."[14] One wishes Boswell had retorted, "but does he not impose them on someone else?" Indeed Johnson himself criticized Rousseau for just such a promiscuous mode of living. Often when he was giving his opinion in general, he took a different stand than he would when considering an individual case.

Boswell cautions us to remember that Johnson was very careful not to give any encouragement to irregular conduct. A gentleman commenting upon a case of singular perverseness in a wife said, "That then he thought a husband might do as he pleased with a safe conscience." "Nay, Sir, this is wild indeed; you must consider that fornication is a crime in a single man; and you cannot have more liberty by being married," Johnson said.[15]

Boswell agreed that "independent of moral obligation, infidelity is by no means a light offence in a husband; because it must hurt a delicate attachment, in which a mutual constancy is implied."[16] He was answering more from experience as he had a dear wife, the mother of his children, whom he loved and respected. Johnson without family ties was moralizing on a question that did not touch him closely.

---

14 Ibid., 880.
15 Ibid., 881.
16 Ibid., 880.

Marriage was another topic of conversation between these two friends. When Boswell married, Johnson gave him this advice:

> Do not expect more from life than life will afford. You may often find yourself out of humour, and you may often think your wife not studious enough to please you; and yet you may have reason to consider yourself as upon the whole very happily married.

Johnson went on thus:

> Our marriage service is too refined. It is calculated only for the best kind of marriages; whereas, we should have a form for matches of convenience, of which there are many.[17]

He agreed with Boswell that that there was no necessity of having the marriage ceremony performed by a regular clergyman, as Scripture did not command this. Johnson did not hold to the opinion that certain men are made for certain women and would not be happy unless they met. He believed marriages would be as happy, or often more so, if they were made by the Lord Chancellor upon due consideration of character, etc., without either party having a voice in the matter.

Johnson made many sallies upon the marriage state that are often repeated. When a certain person who was unhappy in marriage took another wife shortly after the first one died, he said it was the triumph of hope over experience. But marriage is the best state for a man in general, he maintained, and every man is a worse man, in proportion as he is unfit for the married state.

---

17 Ibid., 369.

Carlyle selected Johnson as one of his heroes in his work Heroes and Hero Worship. He called him a great soul, outstanding because of his sincerity, trying hard to get an honest livelihood in the world, and to live without stealing. Nature endowed him with that openness of heart which made him incapable of being insincere. The great gospel he preached was "Clear your mind of Cant!" Carlyle expressed the hope that Johnson's style of living and thinking would never become obsolete, for "his words are sincere words; he meant things by them."[18]

Johnson the great moralist did not look askance at simple pleasures and the necessary comforts of existence. Pleasure itself was not a vice, he maintained. He said it was the narrowest system of morality that would condemn such a practice as adding salt with our meat because it makes it taste better. He had in mind the rules imposed and penances practiced by religous persons and communities through the ages. He said further:

> Having a garden, which we all know to be perfectly innocent, is a great pleasure. At the same time, in this state of being there are many pleasures vices, which however are so immediately agreeable that we can hardly abstain from them. The happiness of Heaven will be, that pleasure and virtue will be perfectly consistent.[19]

Although Johnson is known for the religion and piety he displayed in his life, he was not a long-faced individual frowning upon all simple pleasures. Cards, dress, and dancing

---

18 Thomas Carlyle, Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History, Chicago, 1905, 212.

19 Life, 807.

found favor with him. Puritans, Quakers, and others who preached against ornamentation of the human figure, received this stricture:

> Oh, let us not be found when our Master calls us, ripping the lace off our waistcoats, but the spirit of contention from our souls and tongues! Let us all conform, in outward customs which are of no consequence, to the manners of those whom we live among, and despise such paltry distinctions. A man who cannot get to Heaven in a green coat will not find his way thither in a grey one.[20]

Joseph Towers, LL.D., a contemporary of Johnson, wrote an essay on his life and character which was published in 1786. It is critical and objective, without indulging in too much panegyric and gives a very human picture of Dr. Johnson, with faults and virtues.

He censured other writers who pictured Johnson as a living Saint, and says:

> Some of the friends of Dr. Johnson have been led, by the warmth of their attachment to him, to estimate too highly his moral and religious character. When Mrs. Piozzi tells us, that Dr. Johnson had a mind good beyond all hope of imitation of perishable beings, we can by no means assent to the truth of the proposition, and especially when we find her relating weaknesses of him, which would be thought disgraceful in ordinary men.
>
> Mrs. Piozzi also speaks of him, as one of the most zealous and pious Christians our nation ever produced; and in another place says of his life, that it was a life of seventy years spent in the uniform practice of every moral excellence, and every Christian perfection save humility alone.[21]

---

20 Thrale-Piozzi, Anecdotes, 72.

21 Joseph Towers, LL.D., An Essay on the Life, Character and Writings of Dr. Samuel Johnson, London, 1786, 3-4.

It will be noted in summary that Johnson tried to live as one would expect a good Christian to conduct himself by obeying the precepts of his church, and by setting a good example for all those who had contact with him.

His moral conduct was no veneer, nor was it something that he adopted as the occasion demanded. His religion was real, a vital part of him, as real as his loud thundering voice or his disease marked face.

The virtues of truth, humility, and charity, were practiced by him in an edifying manner. In his speech and writing he tried to advance morality, and strove consciously to avoid anything which would offend God or his fellowman.

It will be seen, too, that though he was a sincere Christian, strict in his practice, he was not a long faced individual who frowned upon all pleasures or comforts in life. Everyone is entitled to make his existence more endurable if he does so in a lawful and moral way, he thought. Johnson preached much on the moral way of life. He was unique in that he practiced what he preached and set an example that was more far reaching than his words.

CHAPTER V

RELIGION AND MORALITY IN DR. JOHNSON'S WRITINGS

On the whole, Dr. Johnson's writings are not extensive. He was more of a talker than a writer, and if Boswell's magic pen had not captured his genius, he would probably only be known as another eighteenth-century writer, remembered for his Dictionary or the Lives of the Poets. His writings, however, are known for their moral tone and sincerity, and the public of his own day referred to him as a moral writer.

Sir Joshua Reynolds said:

> As in his writings not a line can be found which a Saint would wish to blot, so in his own life he would never suffer the least immorality or indelicacy of conversation, or anything contrary to virtue or piety to proceed without a severe check which no elevation of rank exempted them from.[1]

Johnson's first published work, a translation, may be looked upon as having some connection with religion. This was A Voyage to Abyssinia by Pierre Lobo, a Portuguese Jesuit, which

---

1 Johnsoniana, ed. Robina Napier, 354.

he translated from French into English. Johnson used the name Abyssinia later in his own work, History of Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia, and it is believed the use of this word in Father Lobo's work brought it to his attention. Robert Bracey, O.P., in his interesting study makes this comment:

> Was it not perhaps because of his early association with Lobo that Dr. Johnson became throughout his life distinguished above all his contemporaries for his kindly appreciation and intelligent attitude toward Catholics.[2]

Boswell tells us how the work of translation proceeded, thus giving an interesting sidelight on Johnson's sluggish character and slowness in completing a task unless pressed for some good reason. He finished the first few pages of translation quickly enough and they were given to the printer, with the promise that more would be ready when needed. When the printer was out of sight Johnson forgot his task. His friend Mr. Hector knew that if his benevolent nature could be appealed to, he would shake off his indolence. Accordingly he told Johnson that the man would have no other employment until this work was finished, and that in the meantime he and his family would suffer. This was sufficient to get him started. He lay in bed with the book and dictated while Mr. Hector wrote. Hector carried the sheets to the press and corrected the proof, with but little help from Johnson.

---

2 Bracey, Eighteenth Century Studies, 27.

Johnson next proposed to make a translation from Italian of Father Paul Sarpi's History of the Council of Trent, which also is in the religious category; but it happened that another person also named Sam Johnson, who was librarian of St. Martin's-in-the-fields, was working on the same project. Dr. Johnson immediately abandoned his idea. Boswell remarks that "it is much to be regretted that the above performance of that celestial gentleman, Fra Paolo Sarpi, lost the advantage of being incorporated into Britain's literature by the masterly mind of Johnson."

Boswell calls to our attention that in the Dictionary, Johnson quotes no authors whose writings had a tendency to hurt sound religion and morality, and, as he says, "even his moral prejudices found expression in omissions." When some young women complimented him on omitting the naughty words, he replied, "So, my dears, you have been looking for them!"[3] After the publication of this work, Johnson was known as Dictionary Johnson. Carlyle says:

> Had Johnson left nothing but his Dictionary one might have traced there a great intellect, a genuine man. Looking to its clearness of definition, its general solidity, honesty, insight and successful method, it may be called the best of all Dictionaries. There is in it a kind of architectural nobleness; it stands there like a great solid square-built edifice, finished, symmetrically complete; you judge that a true Builder did it.[4]

---

3 George B.Hill, ed., Johnsonian Miscellanies, Oxford, 1897, II, 390.

4 Carlyle, Heroes and Hero Worship, 213.

In 1750 Johnson started the Rambler, the series of papers which gave him an opportunity to display his ability as a teacher of morality and religious wisdom. He composed a lovely prayer on the first appearance of the Rambler, as was his custom whenever he initiated any new literary work. At first the Ramblers were not very popular, but by the time he discontinued them in 1752, their merit was acknowledged. They were then published in book form, translated into foreign languages, and went through many editions. As Joseph Towers says;

> The finest sentiments of morality and of piety are rendered delightful by the harmony and splendor of the language. . . . . .
> The morality inculcated is pure, and the piety in general rational; and the criticisms and observations on life and manners, are acute and instructive. It is one of those works which may repeatedly be read, and which will repeatedly delight."[5]

The papers were written in the majestic, heavy, sonorous style, that we come to know as Johnson's. We learn many of his opinions on life, death, sorrow, and repentance. Even when he is in a light and humorous mood, he is always lofty, and inclined more to the spiritual view of things than to the worldly. He aimed always to instruct his readers and to give them something constructive to think about.

---

5 Towers, Essay on the Life, Character, Writings of Dr. Johnson, 33.

One may think that much time and thought was devoted to the composition of the various Rambler papers. The fact is that each paper was usually written at the last moment, as it was wanted for the press. Often he sent on a certain part of an essay, and while it was being printed, forwarded the balance. His fine paper on "Procrastination" was written in Sir Joshua Reynold's library, where a number of persons were visiting and chatting, and while the printer's boy waited until he finished it.

Johnson's mind was so enriched and his sentiments so lofty that he never had to wait for the muse to strike him; he could draw upon his storehouse of facts and imagination as the occasion and subject demanded.

The Rambler on "The Duty of Secrecy" is quite practical. The doctrine and practice of secrecy the author held to be dangerous, as the one entrusted with the secret often is beset with scruples. He cannot appeal to another person for advice and must suffer in silence. Johnson gives these rules concerning secrecy, from which he thought it not safe to deviate:

> Never to solicit the knowledge of a secret. Not willingly, nor without many limitations, to accept such confidance when it is offered. When a secret is once admitted, to consider the trust as of a very high nature, important as society, and sacred as truth, and therefore not to be violated for any incidental convenience or slight appearance of contrary fitness.[6]

---

6 Works, I, 86.

As has been noted in Chapter One, after the Rambler papers had been discontinued for some time, Johnson produced a weekly paper called The Idler, similar in character to the Rambler. Life and manners were again discussed usually in a lighter vein.

When Johnson published the first part of the Lives of the Poets he said that "they were written in a manner that he hoped would tend to the promotion of piety." This merit may be ascribed to nearly all his work, and especially to his sermons, which unfortunately are little known.

Boswell regarded Johnson as such a great moral and religious teacher that he once suggested that he should write expressly in support of Christianity, for he thought that, although a reverance for it shines through his works in several places, that was not enough. "You know, said I, what Grotius has done, and what Addison has done, you should do also." He said, "I hope I shall."[7]

Johnson always wanted to be victorious in an argument, and often argued contrary to his own personal opinion. However, in conversation with one person, when there was no audience to impress, one could generally be certain that the views expressed were his true feelings. He liked truth too much to write error; hence we can be sure that what he has written is his true

---

7 Boswell, Tour to the Hebrides, 64.

opinion also.

He wrote this advice in a letter to Dr. Charles Burney whc was at work upon a history of music:

> That your book has been delayed I am glad, since you have gained an opportunity of being more exact. Of the caution necessary in adjusting narratives there is no end. Some tell what they do not know, that they may not seem ignorant, and others from mere indifference about truth. All truth is not, indeed, of equal importance; but if little violations are allowed, every violation will in time be thought little; and a writer should keep himself vigilantly on his guard against the first temptations to negligence or supineness.[8]

Rasselas, a philosophic work has found many friends, as it seems to appeal to the troubled spirits of countless persons who, surfeited with comforts and luxuries, still are unhappy and are roaming about restlessly, seeking for they know not what. Johnson in this work tried to show the unsatisfactory nature of things temporal, as well as to direct the hopes of man to things eternal. There is much gloom in the book, but it is relieved by the author's sprightly observations upon life and manners. Many beautiful passages have often been quoted to illustrate Johnson's opinions. One may dip into Rasselas at random and come across observations of sense such as this one:

> Long journeys in search of truth are not commanded. Truth, such as is necessary to the regulation of life, is always found where it is honestly sought. Change of place

---

8 Life., 1150.

> is no natural cause of the increase of piety, for it inevitably produces dissipations of mind.[9]

Rasselas reproached himself when he saw the monks of St. Anthony endure without complaint a life of hardship. It is easy to discern Johnson in this comment:

> Those men, answered Imlac, are less wretched in their silent convent than the Abyssinian princes in their prison of pleasure. Whatever is done by the monks is incited by an adequate and reasonable motive. Their labor supplies them with necessaries; it therefore cannot be omitted, and is certainly rewarded. Their devotion prepares them for another state, and reminds them of its approach, while it fits them for it. Their time is regularly distributed; one duty succeeds another, so that they are not left open to the distraction of unguided choice, nor lost in the shades of listless inactivity. There is a certain task to be performed at an appropriated hour; and their toils are cheerful, because they consider them as acts of piety by which they are always advancing towards endless felicity.[10]

Johnson did not approve of introducing Scriptural phrases into conversation; neither did he use them in his writings, although he wrote very reverently at times, when the subject called for such treatment. He also did not approve of sacred poetry. He maintained that the ideas of Christian Theology are too simple for eloquence, too sacred for fiction, too majestic for ornament; to embellish them by tropes and figures is to magnify by a concave mirror the sidereal hemisphere. He treats of this fully in his essay on Waller in which he agrees

---

9 Works, IV, 41.

10 Ibid., 148.

with Boileau, the French critic, in this respect. Walter Raleigh in his study says Johnson's argument is closely reasoned and eloquently expressed. He quotes it in full. Johnson says in part:

> Let no pious ear be offended if I advance the opposition to many authorities that poetical devotion cannot often please. The doctrines of religion may indeed be defended in a didactic poem, and he who has the happy power of arguing in verse, will not lose it because his subject is sacred. A poet may describe the beauty and grandeur of nature, the flowers of the Spring, and the harvests of Autumn, the vicissitudes of the tide, and the revolutions of the sky, and praise the Maker for his works in lines which no reader shall lay aside. The subject of the disputation is not piety, but the motives to piety; that of the description is not God but the works of God.
>
> Contemplative piety or the intercourse between God and the human soul cannot be poetical. Man admitted to implore the mercy of his Creator and plead the merits of his Redeemer is already in a higher state than poetry can confer.[11]

As is natural, books which played up looseness of morals did not tend to elevate the spirit, and were dismissed by Johnson as worse than nothing. Hannah More tells how she rather flippantly referred to some witty passages in Tom Jones when conversing with Johnson one time. He replied:

> I am shocked to hear you quote from so vicious a book. I am sorry to hear you have read it, a confession which no modest lady should ever make. I scarcely know a more corrupt book.[12]

---

11 Walter Raleigh, Six Essays on Johnson, Oxford, 1927. 125.

12 George B. Hill, ed., Johnsonian Miscellanies, 2 vols., Oxford, 1897, II, 190.

No one need ever be in any doubt as to what Johnson thought about the writings of certain sceptics and infidels. Even though the world acknowledged them, he denounced them in no uncertain terms. Their writings should be banished with themselves, so that they should have no influence with the populace. He maintained further "that all infidel writers usually drop into oblivion when personal connections and the floridness of novelty are gone."[13]

The two writers who annoyed Johnson most were Rousseau and Voltaire. Boswell was friendly with both, visited them in their homes, and corresponded with them. Once he asked Johnson if he thought Rousseau as bad a man as Voltaire. The reply was: "Why, Sir, it is difficult to consider the proportion of iniquity between them."[14]

When Lord Bolingbroke's works were published after his death, Johnson commented:

> Sir, he was a scoundrel, and a coward; a scoundrel for charging a blunderbuss against religion and morality; a coward because he had not resolution to fire it off himself, but left half a crown to a beggarly Scotchman to draw the trigger after his death.[15]

Persons of Johnson's day were great letter writers,

---

13 Life, 1102.

14 Ibid., 308-309.

15 Ibid., 158.

and he wrote hundreds of letters himself. Many of them contain religious sentiments, and are all sincere expressions of a warm hearted man who was ever ready to help anyone in need of advice or consolation. The physical labor involved in writing long letters by hand is something to marvel at, especially since Johnson was inclined to be sluggish and slow in doing any extra tasks. A letter was like a visit from a friend. When away from London he was disappointed when the post brought him no word from home. Boswell and Mrs. Thrale were very faithful correspondents, however, as the number of letters under their signatures prove.

At one time Johnson wrote a very fine letter to a young clergyman in the country, giving excellent advice as to the making of sermons, conducting parish work and the like, which could be read with profit today by any one concerned with such duties. In telling of the difficulty one of his other friends in ministerial work had, he related:

> One woman he could not bring to the communion; and, when he reproved or exhorted her, she only answered that she was no scholar. He was advised to get some good woman or man of the parish, a little wiser than herself, to talk to her in a language level to her mind. Such honest, I may call them holy artifices, must be practiced by every clergyman, for all means must be tried by which souls may be saved. Talk to your people, however, as much as you can; and you will find, that the more frequently you converse with them upon religious subjects, the more willingly they will attend, and the more submissively they will learn. A clergyman's diligence always makes him venerable.[16]

---

16 Ibid., 902.

He wrote the following letter to a young girl, the daughter of his friend, Bennet Langton. In it he is still the philosopher and teacher, but the tone is suited to a very young reader, and the letter shows how tender and understanding he could be on occasion.

My dearest Miss Jenny:

I am sorry that your pretty letter has been so long without being answered; but, when I am not pretty well, I do not always write plain enough for young ladies. I am glad, my dear, to see that you write so well, and hope that you mind your pen, your book, and your needle, for they are all necessary. Your books will give you knowledge and make you respected; your needle will find you useful employment when you donot care to read. When you are a little older, I hope you will be very diligent in learning arithmetic; and, above all, that through your whole life you will carefully say your prayers, and read your Bible.

I am, my dear, your most humble servant,[17]
Sam. Johnson.

May 10, 1784.

Although all of Johnson's work is known for its high moral quality, strictly speaking his Prayers and Meditations are really his only professedly religious writings, but these prayers were not written for the public as was his other work. They were for his eyes alone and are quite different in character from his other publications.

The average person when making a study of Doctor Johnson is apt to be surprised when he comes to the Prayers and

---

17 R. Brimley Johnson, Eighteenth Century Letters, New York, 1898, II,120.

Meditations as they do not fit in with the popular picture of the gross figure, ranting wildly and tearing away at a leg of mutton. Dr. Elton Trueblood, editor of a recent new edition of the Prayers, says that "relatively few know him as the author of genuine classics of Christian devotion."[18]

These prayers and meditations were published after Dr. Johnson's death and, as they stand, are a medley of memoranda, observations and resolves, together with prayers of thankfulness, and cries of penitence from a sin-laden soul as Johnson thought himself to be.

They were published before Boswell's Life was finished, and of them he says:

> This admirable collection. . . evinces beyond all his compositions for the public, and all the eulogies of his friends and admirers, the sincere virtue and piety of Johnson. It proves with unquestionable authenticity that amidst all his constitutional infirmities, his earnestness to conform his practice to the precepts of Christianity was unceasing, and that he habitually labored to refer every transaction of his life to the will of the Supreme Being.[19]

Likely if Johnson had published them himself he would have made some changes and omissions.

One time in a group Johnson said that he knew of no good prayers but those in the Book of Common Prayer. Dr. Adams who was present said, "I wish, Sir, you would compose some family

---

18 Elton Trueblood, ed., Dr. Johndon's Prayers, Stanford University, 1945, ix.

19 Life, 1162.

prayers." Johnson replied, "I will not compose prayers for you, Sir, because you can do it for yourself. But I have thought of getting together all the books of prayers which I could, selecting those which should appear to me the best, putting out some, inserting others, adding some prayers of my own, and prefixing a discourse on prayer."[20]

Boswell reports this scene rather vividly. They pressed around Johnson and urged him to carry out this project. He was annoyed at their eagerness, and cried out angrily, "Do not talk thus of what is so awful. I know not what time God will allow me in this world. There are many things which I wish to do." Some of the company persisted. "Let me alone, let me alone," cried Johnson. "I am overpowered." Johnson then put his hands before his face, and reclined for some time upon the table.[21] This was in June 1784. In December of the same year his life came to an end. Just before he died, he gave the manuscript of his Prayers and Meditations without revision to his friend, George Strahan, D.D., Prebendary of Rochester, and Vicar of Islington. The latter published the first edition in 1785, about eight months after Johnson's death.

All his life Johnson observed certain days of the year with great solemnity, and composed suitable prayers and medita-

---

20 Ibid., 1106.

21 Ibid.

tions to cover them. These days were:

(1) New Year's Day.
(2) March 28th; day on which his wife died.
(3) Good Friday
(4) Easter
(5) September 18th; his own birthday.

The first prayer is dated September, 1738, and was written on his birthday. The last one bears the date August 28, 1784, the year of his death. He, however, composed other prayers on his deathbed, as reported by Boswell. There are 217 separate dated entries in the published volume. Ninety-three are strictly prayers. He likely wrote prayers not recorded in this book, as it was his custom to address himself to his Creator as the occasion arose. He usually prayed before beginning any new study, on starting out on a journey, or when a friend died. On starting the Rambler, this was his plea:

> Almighty God, the giver of all good things, without whose help all labor is ineffectual, and without whose grace, all wisdom is folly; grant, I beseech Thee, that in this, my undertaking, thy Holy Spirit may not be withheld from me, but that I may promote thy glory, and the salvation both of myself and others; grant this, O Lord, for the sake of Jesus Christ.[22]

When his eye was restored to use, he wrote the following:

> Almighty God, who has restored light to my eye, and enabled me to pursue again the studies which thou hast set before me, teach me, by the diminution of my

---

22 Works, VIII, 14.

> sight to remember that whatever I possess is thy gift, and by its recovery, to hope for thy mercy, and, O Lord, take not thy Holy Spirit from me; but grant that I may use thy bounties according to thy will, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.[23]

Johnson was a very humble man when he prayed. He felt himself in the presence of God. Many of his prayers were written in early morning hours when everyone else was asleep, and he was still about, reading and writing. This prayer was written on an anniversary of his wife's death, and was composed at about two o'clock in the morning.

> Almighty God, our heavenly Father, whose judgments terminate in mercy, grant, I beseech Thee, that the remembrance of my wife, whom thou hast taken from me, may not load my woul with unprofitable sorrow, but may excite in me true repentance of my sins and negligence, and, by the cooperation of thy grace, may produce in me a new life, pleasing to Thee. Grant that the loss of mywife may teach me the true use of the blessings which are yet left me; and that, however bereft of worldly comforts, I may find peace and refuge in thy service, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.[24]

On his fifty-first birthday, September 18, 1760, he made these resolutions, Deo juvante:[25]

(1) To combat notions of obligation
(2) To apply to study
(3) To reclaim imaginations
(4) To consult the resolves on Tetty's coffin
(5) To rise early
(6) To study religion
(7) To go to church
(8) To drink less strong liquors

---

23 Ibid., 18.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid., 21.

(9) To keep a journal
(10) To oppose laziness, by
doing what is to be done tomorrow.
(11) Rise as early as I can.
(12) Put books in order.
(13) Scheme of life.

Many persons think that if Johnson had published his prayers he would have left out the following, as it is evidently personal and was a communication between a soul and its Creator.

Easter Eve, 1761.

Since the communion of last Easter, I have led a life so dissipated and useless, and my terrors and perplexities have so much increased, that I am under great depression and discouragement; yet I purpose to present myself before God tomorrow, with humble hope that he will not break the bruised reed.

Come unto Me all ye that travail.

I have resolved, I hope not presumptuously, till I am afraid to resolve again. Yet, hoping in God, I steadfastly purpose to lead a new life. O, God, enable me for Jesus Christ's sake.[26]

This is the entry for Good Friday, April 20, 1764.

I have made no reformation.
I have lived totally useless, more sensual in thought, and more addicted to wine and meat. Grant me, O God, to amend my life, for the sake of Jesus Christ.
I hope:
To put my rooms in order. Disorder I have found one great cause of idleness.
I fasted all day.[27]

Johnson is said to have been very scrupulous. Perhaps that is why he excoriates himself so, as he does in this entry

---

26 Ibid., 22.

27 Ibid., 23.

written April 21, 1764:

> My indolence since my last reception of the Sacrament has sunk into grosser sluggishness, and my dissipation spread into wilder negligence. My thoughts have been clouded with sensuality, and except that from the beginning of this year, I have in some measure forborn excess of strong drink, my appetites have predominated over my reason. A kind of strange oblivion has overspread me, so that I know not what has become of the last year, and perceive that incidents and intelligence pass over me without leaving any impression.
>
> This is not the life to which heaven is promised. I purpose to approach the altar again tomorrow. Grant, O Lord, that I may receive the Sacrament with such resolutions of a better life as may by thy grace be effectual, for the sake of Jesus Christ. Amen.[28]

Ten years later he was still making resolutions, and berating himself for a life of uselessness. On January 1, 1774, he resolved:[29]

(1) To read the Gospels before Easter
(2) To rise at eight
(3) To be temperate in food

Johnson always prayed for his friends, living and dead. He was especially grateful for the friendship of Henry Thrale and his family, as this prayer will attest:

> Almighty God, who art the giver of all good, enable me to remember with due thankfulness the comforts and advantages which I have enjoyed by the friendship of Henry Thrale, for whom so far as it may be lawful, I humbly implore thy mercy in his present state. O Lord, since thou hast been pleased to call him from this world, look with mercy on those whom he has left; continue to succor me by such means as are best

---

28 Ibid., 23.

29 Ibid., 44.

> for us, and repay to his relations the kindness which I have received from him; protect them in this world from temptations and calamities, and grant them happiness in the world to come for Jesus Christ's sake. Amen.[30]

These meditations often took the place of a diary. Perhaps if Johnson had had someone at home to whom he could confide stray thoughts and little happenings when his day's ramblings were done, he would not have recorded much that we find interspersed between the prayers. These various insertions, however, give a true picture of the real Johnson, who recognized his insignificance and unworthiness in the eyes of God.

He never forgot to pray for his wife. In 1782, thirty years after her death we find him recording:

> This is the day on which, in 1752, dear Tetty died. I have now uttered a prayer of repentance and contrition; perhaps Tetty is now praying for me too. God help me. Thou, God, art merciful; hear my prayers, amd enable me to trust in Thee.
>
> We were married almost seventeen years, and have now been parted thirty.[31]

On Good Friday of this year, 1782, he wrote:

> After a night of great disturbance and solicitude, such as I do not remember, I rose, drank tea, but without eating, and went to church. I was very composed, and coming home read Hammond on one of the Psalms for the day. I then read Leviticus. Scott came in. A kind letter from Gastrell. I read on, then went to evening prayers, and afterwards drank tea with Dunne; then read till I finished Leviticus twenty-four pages et sup.[32]

---

30 Ibid., 59.
31 Ibid., 62.
32 Ibid.

Probably the last prayer Johnson composed is the one used by him, previously to receiving the Sacrament on Sunday, December 5, 1784. It is quite long and ends thus:

> Have mercy upon me, and pardon the multitude of my offences. Bless my friends; have mercy upon all men. Support me by thy Holy Spirit in the days of weakness, and at the hour of death; and receive me, at my death, to everlasting happiness, for the sake of Jesus Christ. Amen.[33]

A favorite ejaculation of Johnson's was, "O God, make me to remember that the night cometh when no man can work."

Johnson also wrote forty sermons during the course of his life, which he sold or gave to his clergyman friends, Dr. Taylor appears to have been the chief beneficiary. In 1788 there was published a volume of sermons on different subjects, and in 1789 another volume with the same title, bearing the notation in both cases, "left for publication by John Taylor, LL.D., late Prebendary of Westminster." The style was unmistakably Johnson's. They were then included in the next edition of Johnson's complete works to be published.

Referring to these sermons, Robert Bracey, O.P., says:

> Apart from the Methodist revival, the age in which Johnson lived knew little of religious fervor. The average eighteenth century sermon was so much cold reasoning, ethical dissertation, passionless exhortation. But the pulpit discourses of Johnson were not of such a fashion. Johnson was always perplexing those around him by the reality of

---

33 Ibid., 65.

his beliefs. His sermons reflected the man; they breathe forth a genuine emotion, for Johnson wrote always as though he were on his knees, and with ear strained to catch the accents of some guiding voice.[34]

Johnson gives a quotation from the Scriptures and then proceeds in his masterly way to paint a vivid picture or give an exhortation very moving in its eloquence. These sermons are among the best of his work; they are as fresh and alive as when written, and to know the real Johnson one should study them.

This is a paragraph from Sermon Twenty:

> It is astonishing that any man can forbear inquiring seriously whether there is a God; whether God is just; whether this life is the only state of existence; whether God has appointed rewards and punishments in a future state; whether he has given any laws for the regulation of our conduct here; whether he has given them by revelation; and whether this religion publicly taught carries any mark of Divine appointment. These are questions which every reasonable being ought undoubtedly to consider with an attention suitable to their importance; and he, whom the consideration of eternal happiness or misery cannot awaken from his pleasing dreams, cannot prevail upon to suspend his mirth, surely ought not to despise others for dullness and atupidity.[35]

In Sermon Number One upon marriage, he says:

> Let the religion of the man and the woman be the same. The rancor and hatred, the rage and persecution with which religious disputes have filled the world, need not to be related; every history can inform us that no malice is so fierce, so cruel and implacable, as that which is excited by religious discord. It is to no purpose that they stipulate for the free enjoyment of their own opinion; for how can he be happy, who sees the person most dear to him in a state of dangerous error, and ignorant of those sacred truths which are necessary to the approbation of God, and to future felicity.[36]

---

34 Bracey, Eighteenth Century Studies, 19.

35 Works, VIII, 313.

36 Ibid., 80.

Johnson shows his knowledge of human nature and his understanding of man's weakness in these sermons. They are not simply denunciations of sinners. They are explanations of why man sins and of how by repentance he can become reconciled to his Creator. "Repentance is always difficult," he says,"and delay makes the difficulty greater." He cautions those who have neglected this great duty that it is yet in their power to make amends, and that they cannot perish everlastingly but by their own choice.

It has been said that Johnson's sermons are among the best in English, pulsing and throbbing with earnest faith and fear, yet entirely free from the luscious sentimentality of so many religious compositions.

In his own day Johnson was known as one of the foremost moral writers of the time. He gained this reputation because he thought, as Percy Hazen Houston says, "that it was the function of literature to teach and correct the manners and morals of the populace, to repress evil and encourage good."[37]

The Prayers and Sermons attest his dependence upon God. As he thought that all our actions on this earth are but a preparation for the next life, he was careful not to offend by his pen. His Creator had endowed him with the genius to produce

---

37 Percy Hazen Houston, A Study in Eighteenth Century Humanism, Cambrudge, 1923, 10.

the works that brought him honor and respect while living, and lasting fame after death. He remained humble and sincere in grateful thanks.

He refused to consort with infidel writers, and would do nothing to advance their reputation; rather he spoke in denunciation against them, no matter how well known they were. At a gathering in a London house one time when the Abbe Reynal [a liberal writer in bad graces with the Catholic Church] was present, the host approached Johnson thus: "Will you permit me, Sir, to present to you the Abbe Reynal?" "No, Sir," replied the Doctor very loudly, and suddenly turned away from both of them.[38]

Just as Johnson was dignified in his speech and would never resort to a lie, so is his writing truthful. His words are carefully chosen; they are forceful and sincere. He did not have to resort to vile language, obscenity, or low speech to make his meaning clear. Thus he achieved a style and mode of expression that has majesty and dignity to it.

Johnson lived the moral life, and in his writings in general nothing can be found that would detract from his reputation as a writer of truly Christian endeavor, while his specifically religious writings manifest his strong faith and warm devotion.

---

38 Thrale-Piozzi, Anecdotes, 63.

CONCLUSION

Samuel Johnson was born a Christian, and sincerely lived and died as one. He never forgot that our time upon earth is but a preparation for the life to come. He honored and loved the Supreme Being, but his attitude toward Him was filled with too much fear and prevented him from entering into that intimate union with his Creator that he seemed to desire. He had a deep religious sense, a heart that never conceived an untruth, and a tongue that probably never told one. His religion, however that of the High Church of England, was not a gentle and sunny element in his life but contributed to a life crossed with storm and struggle. It did not bring him that peace and happiness that he was always seeking. He was not in tune with his Creator.

In the Secret of Inward Peace, A. Herbert Gray says:

> Great numbers of middle aged people get in their childhood impressions of God as a stern and terrible dictator, from which they have never been able fully to escape, so that life has been overshadowed.[1]

In a sense this description fits Johnson.

---

1 A. Herbert Gray, Secret of Inward Peace, New York, 1948, 13.

Joshua Loth Liebman says:

> A wise religion is indispensable for peace of mind because it blesses us with inner gifts beyond the bestowal of any science; a sense of our purpose in the world, a feeling of relatedness to God, the shared warmth of group fellowship, and the subordination of our little egos to great moral and spiritual ends.[2]

Johnson's religion did not do all this for him. He was able to sense the truth in anything, but he was very loyal to what he professed in politics or religion. He seemed to think that the religion one was born into was the one God meant him to have, and that to change it was a very wrong thing to do. At heart, however, Johnson had strong Catholic tendencies. He may not have known this, but he betrayed himself many times. As Percy Fitzgerald says in an interesting article, "Like Shakespeare, Johnson had the Catholic spirit; that difficult to define feeling and instinct which is almost inconsistent with the creed and feeling of the genuine Protestant. Johnson was well worthy to be a Catholic from the fine nobility of his thought and his high sense of principle."[3]

He had no love for Dissenters from the Established Church and never lost an opportunity to castigate them. He, however, spoke warmly of Catholics, was familiar with Catholic doc-

---

2 Joshua Loth Liebman, Peace of Mind, New York, 1947, 55.

3 Percy Fitzgerald, "The Catholic Tendencies of Dr. Johnson," The Month, 93:64, January, 1899.

trine and practice, and was never happier than when conversing with his Catholic clerical friends. These conversations were often in Latin as he delighted in the opportunity to exercise his skill in this tongue. He had an altogether different approach and attitude when talking to divines of his own church. They were satisfactory for the performance of some offices, but there were times when he thought their ministrations would be ineffectual. One time when he and Boswell were talking about religious discipline proper for unhappy convicts, he said: "Sir, one of our regular clergy will probably not impress their minds sufficiently They should be attended by a Methodist preacher or a Popish priest."[4]

Johnson's first knowledge of God was that of a stern father, ready to punish an offender who transgressed His laws. If he had had the good fortune to have been a Catholic, his young mind would probably have learned to love God as the Infant Jesus. Then as an adult he would likely have had a picture of a more gentle Savior, filled with compassion for the earth's weak creatures. He would also have had the help of sanctifying grace which the sacraments give to assist him on the road of self perfection.

Confession might well have provided comfort for his

---

4 Life, 1128.

troubled soul. Peace of heart might likely have been his after receiving absolution from one of God's ordained ministers. It would not then have been necessary to write into his little book his sins and weaknesses in the small hours of the morning, when a troubled mind chased sleep away.

The saying of a rosary might have benefited Johnson greatly, for the physical act of passing the beads through his fingers would probably have quieted him. He always had to be doing something such as tapping his shoe, making noises with his mouth, or giving quick convulsive starts when not engaged in conversation or work that took his whole attention. He once mentioned to Mrs. Thrale that he envied young ladies who had stitching to do in their spare moments for it occupied their hands and minds and kept their imaginations in check. Once he himself took up knotting under the tutelage of Miss Dempster, sister of his friend George Dempster, but he could not learn it, he confessed. He thought the knitting of stockings a good amusement. "As a freeman of Aberdeen I should be a knitter of stockings," he remarked to Boswell once in their moments of lighter conversation.[5]

Johnson was always a lonely man. He enjoyed talking to the women friends he met in the course of his life, and he

---

5 Life, 774-775.

was a favorite with many of them. He could be full of fun and merriment, ever ready with a compliment, when he wished. The Blessed Virgin could have filled a singular place in his life, especially after the death of his dear Tetty. We can well imagine his petitions to her. And we can readily judge that in his loneliness he did not enjoy any substitute for the comfort her love could give.

Johnson went to church because it was his duty and because of the effect upon others. He could scarcely understand the sermon, for his hearing was bad; and the sermon was the biggest part of the service. As a Catholic, the Sacrifice of the Mass, and the "mysticism" of Benediction would have helped to put him into that union with his Creator that he desired but never achieved. One rarely thinks of Johnson as having been married. He seemed alone always. We think of him, as we do of Newman, a leader of men in God's service, fighting for right and for truth. He would have made a wonderful abbot, or a saintly bishop, traveling about a diocese, giving advice and bestowing his blessing upon those under his charge.

Johnson was so sincere and so eager to follow the truth that one regrets that in his religion he did not reach it. Many persons feel as Chas. E. Ryder does when he says:

> It must be admitted that the life and death of Dr. Johnson form a striking example of how much real religion may exist in one who has not the true faith, and of the

> impossibility of enjoying the light and peace of the Catholic Church outside her pale. One hesitates whether most to pity the earnest voice 'crying in the night--crying for the light' or to despise the maternal incapacity of the English Establishment that was unable to minister consolation to one so religious in the doubts and anxieties of life, or even in the dark hour of death.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> Nothing fits a sincere man so close as his religion, and certainly in Dr. Johnson when we consider his circumstances of dependence upon Protestant favor for the reputation and sale of his writings, the vigorous independence of his intellect in well shown by the bold way in which he expressed himself on religious matters.[6]

Augustine Birrell says: "Johnson is a transmitted personality. We know more about him than we do about anything else in the world. To transmit personality is the secret of literature as truly as the transmission of force is the maunspring of the universe. It is also the secret of religion."[7]

Johnson had the true missionary spirit. He preached religion to all who came under his influence. He taught them to read their bible, to pray constantly, and to be good to the poor. As Elbert Hubbard says in his Little Journey, "hardly a day passed but some one weak, weary, and worn, arose and called him blessed. The companionship of Johnson inspired Reynolds to better painting, Garrick to better acting, and countless others to practice the Christian virtues of charity and benevolence to all, and to submit

---

6 Chas. E. Ryder, "Dr. Johnson's Opinions on Religion," The Month, 38:418, March, 1880.

7 Augustine Birrell, "The Transmission of Dr. Johnson's Personality," Modern Eloquence, Philadelphia, 1900, VII, 89.

with resignation to the Divine Will."[8] The knowledge of the life to come cheered Johnson, helped him overcome obstacles and to bear the disappointments and bitterness he found on earth.

Although his religion failed him in one way, yet in practicing it as he did, he set an example for all to follow, and his life will ever be an inspiration to all who look beyond the present day. Big in stature, big in soul, he was only a trembling child when he stood before his God and asked His mercy for sins which he probably had not committed. In his desire to be ever perfect and sure of bliss to come, small misdemeanors loomed large since he knew that God sees all.

Samuel Johnson stands out as a bright luminary in an age studded with atheistic writers who were confusing the simple people with their blasts at God and all that this good man held in reverence.

Childlike piety in a great man is a praiseworthy trait. Johnson possessed it in a large degree. He possessed another trait, however, that did not serve him so well. Once he said, "I would be a Papist if I could. I fear enough, but an obstinate rationality prevents me. I would never be a Papist unless on the near approach of death, of which I have a great terror."[9]

---

8 Elbert Hubbard, Little Journeys to the Homes of English Authors, New York, 1903, 197.

9 Life, 1103.

This rationality probably prevented him from enjoying in full measure the comforts of another religion that he seemed to long for, in the place of the one that served him rather lamely on the whole. As Robert Bracey, O.P., says, "If ever a man ostensibly outside the fold, belonged by the fugitive longings of his heart to the soul of the Church, that man was Johnson."[10]

He loved God, His poor, and Truth. His life, as well as his writings, is an example to all.

---

10 Robert Bracey, O.P., Eighteenth Century Studies, 9.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

I. PRIMARY SOURCES

Johnson, Samuel, LL.D., Annals, An Account of the Life of Dr. Samuel Johnson from His Birth to His Eleventh Year, Written by Himself, printed for R. Phillips by Nichols & Son, London, 1805.

Johnson, Samuel, LL.D., Complete Works, 8 vols., New Cambridge Edition, Harvard Co-op. Society, n.d.

Johnson, Samuel, LL.D., A Dictionary of the English Language, 2 vols., London, 1755.

Johnson, Samuel, LL.D., The History of Rasselas, ed., R. W. Chapman, Oxford, 1927.

Johnson, Samuel, LL.D., Johnson and Queeney, Letters from Dr. Johnson to Queeney Thrale, ed., Marquis of Lansdowne, London, 1932.

Johnson, Samuel, LL.D., Letters, 2 vols., collected and edited by George Birkbeck Hill, New York, 1892.

Johnson, Samuel, LL.D., Lives of the English Poets, ed., George Birkbeck Hill, 3 vols., Oxford, 1905.

Johnson, Samuel, LL.D., The Poems of Samuel Johnson, ed., D. Nichol Smith, Oxford, 1941.

Johnson, Samuel, LL.D., Dr. Johnson's Prayers, ed., Elton Trueblood, Stanford University, 1945.

II. SECONDARY SOURCES

A. BOOKS

Armitage, Robert, Dr. Johnson, His Religious Life and His Death, London, 1851.

Bailey, John, Dr. Johnson and His Circle, New York, 1913.

Balderston, Katharine C., ed., Thraliana, 2 vols,, Oxford, 1942.

Birrell, Augustine, "The Transmission of Dr. Johnson's Personality" Modern Eloquence, Vol. VII, Philadelphia, 1900.

Book of Common Prayer, The, London, Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1892.

Bolton, Sarah K., Lives of Poor Boys Who Became Famous, New York, 1939.

Boswell, James, The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D., Modern Library Edition, New York, n.d.

Boswell, James, The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D., John Wilson Croker, LL.D., F.R.S., editor, 2 vols., New York, 1851.

Boswell, James, Account of Corsica, London, 1768.

Boswell, James, Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides, New York, 1936

Boswell, James, Letters Addressed to W. J. Temple, London, 1857.

Bracey, Robert, O.P., Eighteenth Century Studies, Oxford, 1925.

Broadley, A. M., Dr. Johnson and Mrs. Thrale, New York, 1910.

Bronson, Bertrand E., Johnson Agonistes and Other Essays, Cambridge, 1946.

Cairns, William T., The Religion of Dr. Johnson and Other Essays, London, 1946.

Carlson, Carl E., The First Magazine: A History of the Gentleman's Magazine, Providence, 1938.

Carlyle, Thomas, Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History, Chicago, 1905.

Chapman, Robert W., Two Centuries of Johnson Scholarship, Glasgow, 1945.

Chapman, Robert W., "Johnson in Scotland," Portrait of a Scholar, London, 1920.

Chase, Mary Ellen, A Goodly Fellowship, New York, 1939.

Chesterton, Cecil, Mrs., Life of St. Theresa, New York, 1928.

Christie, O. F., Johnson, the Essayist: His Opinions of Men, Morals, and Manners, London, 1924.

Courtney, William P., A Bibliography of Samuel Johnson, Oxford, 1925.

Craig, William H., Dr. Johnson and the Fair Sex, London, 1895.

Cross, Alexander, Dr. Johnson, Lexicographer, Scholar, Man of Letters, London, 1946.

D'Arblay, Mme. Frances Burney, Doctor Johnson and Fanny Burney, ed., Chauncey Brewster Tinker, New York, 1911.

Elwin, Whitwell, Some Eighteenth Century Men of Letters, London, 1902.

Emery, John Pike, Arthur Murphy, Philadelphia, 1946.

Grant, Lieut. Col. F., Life of Samuel Johnson, London, 1887.

Gray, A. Herbert, Secret of Inward Peace, New York, 1948.

Hawkins, Sir John, Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D., London, 1787.

Hahn, Emily, A Degree of Prudery, New York, 1950.

Hay, James, Johnson, His Characteristics and Aphorisms, London, 1884.

Hill, George Birkbeck, Dr. Johnson, His Friends and His Critics, London, 1878.

Hill, George Birkbeck, Footsteps of Dr. Johnson, London, 1890.

Hill, George Birkbeck, Johnsonian Miscellanies, 2 vols., Oxford, 1897.

Hilles, F. W., ed., Age of Johnson, New Haven, 1949.

Hollis, Christopher, Dr. Johnson, London, 1928.

Hopkins, Mary Alden, Hannah More and Her Circle, New York, 1949.

Houston, Percy Hazen, A Study in Eighteenth Century Humanism, Cambridge, Harvard University, 1923.

Hubbard, Elbert, Little Journeys to the Homes of English Authors, New York, 1903.

Johnson, R. Brimley, ed., Eighteenth Century Letters, 2 vols., New York, 1898.

Kingsmill, Hugh, Johnson Without Boswell, New York, 1941.

Kronenberger, Louis, ed., The Portable Johnson, New York, 1947.

Krutch, Joseph W., Samuel Johnson, New York, 1944.

Lewis, D. B. Wyndham, The Hooded Hawk, New York, 1947.

Liebman, Joshua Loth, Peace of Mind, New York, 1947.

Lunn, Hugh K., Samuel Johnson, London, 1933.

Lynd, Robert, Dr. Johnson and Company, London, 1928.

Macaulay, Thomas B., Literary Essays, London, 1937.

MacLaurin, Charles, Post Mortems of Mere Mortals, New York, 1935.

Madden, Richard R., Infirmities of Genius, 2 vols., London, 1833.

Meynell, Alice, and Gilbert Chesterton, Samuel Johnson, London, 1911.

Moore, Frank F., A Georgian Pageant, New York, 1909.

Mossner, Ernest C., The Forgotten Hume, New York, 1943.

Murphy, Arthur, An Essay on the Life and Genius of Samuel Johnson, LL.D., London, 1793.

Napier, Robina, ed., Johnsoniana, London, 1899.

Newman, John Henry Cardinal, Apologia Pro Vita Sua, New York, 1946.

Newman, John Henry Cardinal, The Dream of Gerontius, London, 1914.

O'Connell, Daniel M., Heart to Heart, A Cardinal Newman Prayer-book, New York, 1938.

Parrott, Thomas M., Studies of a Booklover, New York, 1904.

Pearson Hesketh, Skye High, New York, 1938.

Piozzi, Hester Lynch Thrale, Anecdotes of the late Samuel Johnson, ed., D. C. Roberts, Boston, 1925.

Raleigh, Sir Walter, Six Essays on Johnson, New York, 1927.

Roberts, S. C., Dr. Johnson, London, 1927.

Rosebery, Lord, Miscellanies Literary and Historical, 2 vols., London, 1921.

Salpeter, Harry, Dr. Johnson and Mr. Boswell, New York, 1929.

Seccombe, Thomas, Age of Johnson, London, 1923.

Shorter, Clement, Immortal Memories, New York, 1907.

Spittal, John Ker, Contemporary Criticism of Dr. Samuel Johnson, London, 1923.

Stephen, Leslie, Samuel Johnson, London, 1870.

Stephen, Leslie, Studies of a Biographer, London, 1902.

Towers, Joseph, An Essay on the Life, Character and Writings of Dr. Samuel Johnson, London, 1786.

Turberville, A. S., English Men and Manners in the 18th Century, Oxford, 1941.

Various Hands, Johnson Club Papers, London, T. Fisher Unwin, 1920.

Vulliamy, C. E., Ursa Major, London, 1946.

Watkins, W. B. C.,Perilous Balance, Princeton, 1939.

B. ARTICLES

Baker, Carlos, "Cham on Horseback," Virginia Quarterly Review, 26 No. 1:76-90, January, 1950.

Belshaw, Harry, "The Influence of John Wesley on Dr. Johnson's Religion," London Quarterly and Holborn Review, 168:226-234, July, 1943.

Birrell, Augustine, "Dr. Johnson," Contemporary Review, 47:25, January, 1885.

Brown, Stuart G., "Dr. Johnson and the Religious Problem," English Studies, 20:1-17, February, 1938.

Drummond, Father E. J., "For the Night Cometh," The Catholic World, 155:454-459, July, 1942.

Esdail, Arundell, "The Religion of Reality," Contemporary Review, 130:751-56, December, 1926.

Fitzgerald, Percy, "Dr. Johnson's Catholic Tendencies," Month, 93:64, January, 1899.

Fremantle, Anne, "Boswell's Boswell," The Commonweal, 47:375-76, January 23, 1948.

Gregory, Horace, "Samuel Johnson in the Twentieth Century," Saturday Review of Literature, 26:4-6, July 24, 1943.

Gregory, T. S., "Patriarch and Prodigal," Tablet, 189:23-4, January 11, 1947.

Hagstrum, J. H., "On Dr. Johnson's Fear of Death," English Literary History, 14:308-19, December, 1947.

Hallett, H. F., "Dr. Johnson's Refutation of Bishop Berkeley," Mind, 56:132-47, April, 1947.

Hennig, J., "Young Johnson and the Jesuits," Month, 182:440-9, November, 1946.

Krutch, Joseph, "Samuel Johnson as Critic," Nation, 158:218, February, 1944.

Lewis, W. S., "Young Waterman," Virginia Quarterly Review, 25 1:66-73, January, 1949.

Liebert, H. W., "Reflections on Samuel Johnson," Journal of English and German Philology, 47:80-8, January, 1948.

Mossner, E. C., "Dr. Johnson in partibus infidelium," Modern Language Notes, 63:516-19, December 1948.

Pillans, T. C., "Dr. Johnson and Catholicism," Truth, 35:21-2, September, 1931.

Pottle, Frederick A., "Johnson's Life and Writing," The Yale Review, 34:546-49.

Pottle, Frederick A., "The Dark Hints of Sir John Hawkins and Boswell," Modern Language Notes, 56:325-29, May 1941.

Quintus Quiz, "Standing up to Dr. Johnson," Christian Century, 66:871-2, July 16, 1947.

Quintus Quiz, "Dr. Johnson's Prayer," Christian Century, 55:9, January 5, 1938.

Ryder, Chas. E., "Dr. Johnson's Opinions on Religion," The Month, 38:418 ,March, 1880.

Smith, Neil G., "The Piety of Dr. Johnson," Queen's Quarterly, 44:477-52, November, 1937.

Tracy, C. R., "Democritus Arise," Yale Review, ns 39:294-310, December, 1949.

Van Dyke, Henry, Jr., "A Sturdy Christian," Andover Review, 5:490-96, May, 1886.

C. UNPUBLISHED MATERIALS

Miday, John J., S. J., "Influences of The Book of Common Prayer on Samuel Johnson's Spirituality as Manifested in His Prayers and Meditations," Unpublished Master's Thesis, Loyola University, Chicago, Illinois, 1947.

APPROVAL SHEET

The thesis submitted by Ella McElligott has been read and approved by three members of the Department of English.

The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated, and that the thesis is now given final approval with reference to content, form, and mechanical accuracy.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

Jan. 5, 1951
Date

Norman W Eyand, S.J.
Signature of Adviser